



Bringing Equity to the Conversation

Prioritizing relationships nourishes young people, particularly in the face of biases, discrimination, marginalization, and systemic barriers. Youth-serving organizations can connect their focus on relationships to efforts that move society toward addressing injustice and inequity. This guide offers four strategies for centering equity as a shared goal in communications and messaging about developmental relationships.

1. Develop shared language and principles around equity.

Shared language and principles around equity are needed to navigate multiple systems of power, privilege, and dominance. Consider discussing these points with stakeholders, team members, and contributors:

- Are we focused on particular equity efforts—racial equity, gender equity, or ability, to name a few?
- What is the context for the inequity our work addresses? How and why does inequity persist?
- How does society advantage some groups and discount or disadvantage others?
- What definitions of terms like equity, implicit bias, or intersectionality are we operating within and sharing?*
- What key principles, like recognizing inequity, learning the connection between histories and current realities, or challenging norms, do we embrace?*

Your team's answers to these questions can inform its equity and communications strategy.

* Find definitions for these key terms and more, in Center for the Study of Social Policy's publication: *Key Equity Terms & Concepts: A Glossary for Shared Understanding*.

2. Know what you're up against and avoid cues that detract from your message.

Before audiences hear your message, they've been exposed to other shared assumptions about any given topic. Often, these preexisting assumptions can be “models”—patterns of processing new information—that keep social issues stuck in place. Here are three relevant assumptions that public thinking research* has uncovered.

- *Fatalism* reflects the sense that nothing can be done about many social issues, including inequity and disparities. Instead of seeing disparities and discrimination as addressable conditions, audiences interpret them as a natural part of life.
- *Historical Progress* is the demand that people consider “how far the nation has come” in the discussion of inequity. When applied to race, this model allows racism and discrimination to be labeled as specific individual behaviors from the past, rather than systemic realities that continue today.
- *Individualism* and the cultural myth of the “self-made individual” allow people to reason that individuals or groups who “failed” didn't try hard enough to overcome adversity. This pattern assigns the blame for social problems to the people most impacted by them.

Center equity in communications by avoiding language that activates these models.

3. Use values cues instead of assuming that equity explains itself.

In addition to having a shared definition of equity, communicators can center equity by explaining why it matters. The equity concept acknowledges unequal starting places and the need to correct imbalances between individuals or groups. Appealing to carefully chosen values, like justice or interdependence, allows communicators to show why equity matters for the collective. When communicating about developmental relationships, appealing to the value of *Inclusive Opportunity* is a strategy for explaining how marginalization can impact developmental relationships and why communities share a stake in cultivating supportive, close relationships between adults and youth.

Consider the sample explanation below, which links *Inclusive Opportunity*—the need all young people share for developmental relationships—to specific barriers to relationships and wellbeing.

* FrameWorks Institute's framing research tries to uncover recurring patterns in thinking—cultural models—that might structure how audiences interpret information. To learn more about this type of research, as well as cultural models about developmental relationships, please visit www.frameworksinstitute.org/developmental-relationships.html.



All young people should have what they need to create and sustain developmental relationships with the adults in their life. Race, class, language, gender, or sexual orientation shouldn't get in the way of that. But for some young people, they do, because the places where they form relationships are changing. In communities experiencing rapid redevelopment, churches are closing as their congregation moves away, budget cuts are impacting afterschool programs, and closed bus routes make transportation difficult. Changes like these impact how and where relationships take root. To live up to the American ideal of a just and inclusive society, we have to make sure that all young people have access to strong relationships.

4. Amplify other equity-minded advocates' work.

Make relationships more top-of-mind and connect your work to other fields centering equity. Here are tips for how to connect relationships to related topics.

- **Tell an aspirational story about community schools.** Advocates and policymakers continue to develop innovative approaches for remodeling public education, including advancing community schools. Schools have long been central to community vitality, and community schools restore that role by considering what supports students, families, and the community need beyond learning.
- **Connect relationships to community development and housing availability.** Residential segregation and rapid redevelopment of some areas have disrupted the traditional social ties and connections that make developmental relationships possible. Where you live shouldn't determine your success in life or whether you form developmental relationships. When explaining why affordable communities matter, use the value of *Interdependence* to highlight the interconnectedness of communities and neighborhoods.

Supporting other fields' work can build relationships with other partners and expand your messenger bank, while helping audiences consider how we can support relationships.