



6 Ways to Positively Respond to Youth

On March 24th, thousands of people marched in various cities across the globe to make their voices heard regarding the call to end gun violence. We are seeing more and more demonstrations, and activism is increasing especially amongst our youth. Many of us already have developed the strategies needed and know how to make our own voice heard. And while we are thrilled to see our youth become more vocal and exert their own power, we might not know the best way to respond to them as they explore the opportunity to form and express their own opinions and find their own voice.

Below are six relational actions taken from Search Institute's [Developmental Relationships Framework](#) that we can use to respond to our mentees who are developing their voices, and help them become their best selves.

1. **Listen** - Rather than assuming we know what young people are thinking about the issue and why it matters to them, we need to hold the space for them to tell us - in their own words.
2. **Respect** - To find their own voices, young people need us to take them seriously and treat them fairly (even if we disagree with their position). We show our respect in many ways, including engaging them in serious conversations about issues, not talking down to them or belittling their concerns or ideas, and being honest with them about the challenges.
3. **Navigate** - Young People will encounter complex, challenging systems as they seek to create positive change, whether in their school, community, state, or the nation. An important way adults support them is to help them figure out how to work through the system, challenge injustices, and try new approaches when one strategy doesn't work.
4. **Reflect on Failures** - Ending gun violence is not a small undertaking. Inevitably, some aspects of their activism won't go well. They might flub their lines when making a speech. They may be snubbed by those in power. They may not achieve the policy changes they seek. These realities are all part of civic development. These situations offer important opportunities to help young people learn from the setbacks and figure out new paths forward.
5. **Collaborate** - When young people encounter obstacles in their quest to create social change, how do we work together - not take over- to solve the problems? Just as we would with adults, we examine underlying issues, identify potential creative strategies, focus on those that have the most potential, then work out a plan to move forward. In the process, we share power and help them learn critical skills for working together to create impact.
6. **Let them lead** - To be sure adults can and do work alongside them, collaborate with them, and help them navigate difficult issues, emotions and systems. But the power comes in young people's own voice and leadership!

Supporting your mentee in finding their voice isn't just about what you can do with or for them. It is a two way street, grounded in the healthy give and take that is part of any strong relationship. So instead of asking "What can I do?" ask "How am I responding to, learning from and being inspired by my mentee?"