



*The Camp Fire  
Journey*

Strong Relationships for Thriving Youth



Camp Fire

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# About Camp Fire

An inclusive, national youth development organization, Camp Fire connects young people to the community and wider world around them. Everything Camp Fire does is based on cutting-edge research and founded on the pillars of social and emotional learning: out-of-school time programs, environmental education and camps, and teen service and leadership development programs.

Because young people shape the world, Camp Fire gives them the opportunity to find their spark, lift their voice, and discover who they are. For more information, visit [campfire.org](https://www.campfire.org).

**52** councils serving more than **175,000** youth and families across **25** states and Washington, D.C.



At Camp Fire, our youth build a community that they feel they belong to—one that centers on impactful relationships. At Camp Fire programs, youth understand that their voice is valued, they have opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement, and they are encouraged to bring their whole selves to the program. Building a community is an intentional process that begins with investing in our staff. By equipping staff with successful relationship-building strategies, we put young people on the path to positive development and societal impact.

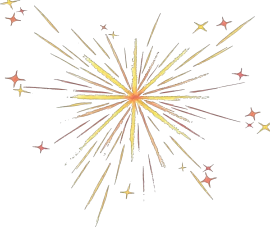
# Conditions for Learning and Development

The out-of-school time field is evolving to meet the emerging needs of youth and families in an everchanging landscape.

What remains consistent is the research on healthy development and the lessons we have learned from our years of experience working in, with, and on behalf of communities.

This diagram depicts the optimal conditions for learning and development derived from the multi-disciplinary science findings. It shows the five practical, non-negotiable supports youth need to thrive.





## At Camp Fire, we cultivate strong and supportive relationships with youth by harnessing research and our extensive experience working with young people.

Camp Fire is committed to using research to inform the way we work with youth and the way we train and support adult champions—staff with youth-facing roles. The science of learning and development is compelling! Experts in neuroscience, education, psychology, sociology, and other fields validate what we already know as youth development professionals:<sup>1</sup>



**All youth have potential!**

**Each young person is unique and will learn and grow in a way that reflects their individuality.**

**Young people's minds are incredibly adaptable, especially when it comes to learning new things and navigating challenges.**

**When, where, what, and how young people learn matters.**

**Strong, multidimensional relationships are one of the main drivers for healthy development.**







# Camp Fire aims to set all youth on their path to thriving—or reaching their full potential.

In our programs, we take a whole child approach by intentionally creating the environment, experiences, and relationships needed to unleash potential in every youth participant. This work is rooted in research-based practices that foster strong learning and development and promote positive outcomes.

This resource is a deep dive into how we provided one of those supports—positive developmental relationships—to youth. At Camp Fire, we refer to these positive developmental relationships as “strong, impactful relationships.”



The graphic is titled "Program Framework" and is divided into two main sections: "What We Do" and "Why It Matters".

**What We Do**

- CREATE POWERFUL YOUTH EXPERIENCES**
- Experiential learning in, for, or about the community or outdoors
- Diverse, equitable environments that are inclusive of all young people
- Adults who prioritize youth
- Peer-to-peer engagement
- Spark discovery
- Goal management

**Why It Matters**

- TO DEVELOP ESSENTIAL SKILLS & MINDSETS**
- Environmental stewardship
- Positive identity
- Sense of belonging
- Contribution
- Self-management
- Social skills
- Creative thinking

- THAT HAVE LONG-TERM BENEFITS**
- Lifelong love of nature
- Health & well-being
- Civically engaged
- Academic success
- Job & career-readiness

- AND MAKE A POSITIVE SOCIETAL IMPACT**
- Stewards of the Earth
- Vibrant & engaged communities
- Citizens who contribute & lead
- Workforce ready for the future

The graphic also features a central illustration of a road with a signpost that reads "CAMP FIREWORKS IN COMMUNITIES AND IN NATURE", a red sign for "PROGRAM ZONE" (Before and After School, During the School Day, Summer), and a compass icon. The background includes stylized trees and buildings.

LOOKING FOR DIRECTIONS?  
[campfireresources.org/programframework](http://campfireresources.org/programframework)

# Strong, Impactful Relationships

We know from the science of learning and development that opportunities to develop supportive youth-adult and peer relationships are a vital component of a whole child approach to development.

The intentional relationships we develop with youth help increase social and emotional competence, promote engagement in learning, and boost academic performance. We have always prioritized cultivating strong, impactful relationships to move youth toward thriving.

Now more than ever, youth need these relationships to stay connected, practice social and emotional skills, and learn. We would like to introduce you to the powerful, research-informed approach we use to nurture relationships among youth and between youth and our staff.

Camp Fire uses the [Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework](#) to cultivate strong, impactful relationships with youth. We couple this framework with other successful practices, including:

- ✓ **Creating a sense of belonging,**
- ✓ **Valuing and soliciting youth voice,**
- ✓ **Providing meaningful peer-to-peer engagement,**
- ✓ **Encouraging youth to bring their whole self to the program, and**
- ✓ **Equipping staff with training and critical practices to nurture strong developmental relationships.**

These practices have roots in the science of learning and development. In short, they contribute to optimal whole child development.



# Developmental Relationships Framework



Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework describes five components needed to transform relationships into positive developmental tools. Camp Fire's adult champions bring the five components, shown in the figure, by employing 20 specific actions in their interactions with youth.

Camp Fire became one of the first organizations to adopt the Search Institute's Development Relationship Framework when we joined the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative (ROI). The goal of the project is to road-test intentional, relationship-building tools and strategies and show how youth benefit from strong, impactful relationships. Three years into the project, Camp Fire Columbia, our ROI pilot site, is already reaping the benefits. They have seen higher retention rates and more youth engagement from the teens that the council serves.



# A SENSE OF BELONGING

94% of youth feel happy, heard, and supported in Camp Fire.



2019 Camp Fire Evaluation



The science of learning and development calls for youth-serving organizations to create environments where youth feel like they belong. At Camp Fire, our young people build a community with one another and with our adult champions. Our approach to community building is grounded in experiential learning, where youth learn through collaborative inquiry about their communities and the natural world.

One practice we use that is aligned with the science of learning and development is to engage youth in relationship-driven routines that invite them to fully participate in their learning. A flagship example is youth and adult champions coming together around a campfire during summer camp to share, reflect, and get to know one another.

We encourage youth to express compassion and care as they collaborate with others. At the same time, adult champions ensure that young people's cultures are reflected, respected, and celebrated. As a result, youth feel emotionally connected. They feel a sense of belonging, and they strengthen their social and emotional skills.



## YOUTH VOICE

Staff in high-quality youth development programs find ways to amplify the voices of youth in their programs. We design and implement programs that authentically elevate youth voice and meaningfully integrate culture, identity, and diversity.

Our adult champions encourage and support youth to design their own learning experiences. In this way, we share power with youth. Youth voice is built into our efforts to improve our programs. In our councils, adult champions regularly seek feedback from youth. They ask youth what they thought about activities and what they would like to see more of. The Camp Fire National Office partners with the National Youth Advisory Cabinet, a group of 16- to 21-year-old leaders charged with informing key program decisions, planning the youth track of the Camp Fire leadership conference, and directing any new youth initiatives.

The science of learning and development tells us that by inviting youth voice and listening—really listening—to young people, youth-serving organizations, like Camp Fire, can promote young people’s sense of agency and teach them that their voices can incite change.



**At Camp Fire Orca in Tacoma, Washington,** teens wanted to plan their own weeklong summer camp. The adult champions shared a budget with youth and then stepped back to allow youth to lead the planning. These teens were up for the challenge! They planned all aspects of the summer camp—even the bus routes for getting to and from activities.





# PEER-TO-PEER ENGAGEMENT

From our experience offering high-quality programming and from the science of learning and development, we know that learning environments must set the stage for positive, trusting relationships to grow. We set the stage by helping youth learn about one another, making collaboration a necessary aspect of learning, and giving youth meaningful roles.

Lasting, impactful relationships are developed over time; each interaction has the potential to strengthen a connection. We recognize that each person has something to offer and something to gain. At Camp Fire, youth get to know one another through creative introductions, fun icebreakers, culturally responsive learning communities, and regular personal updates.

We believe in giving young people a plethora of opportunities to partner with their peers. In practice, this means that Camp Fire's experiential learning involves teamwork and that youth participate in team-building activities designed to build group cohesion. Young people carry out projects together, develop products with one another, and problem-solve collectively. These opportunities require youth to collaborate to achieve a shared and meaningful goal. At the same time, youth draw connections between the activities and the world in which they live.



**“My favorite part was teaching someone canoeing. It’s something they had never done before.”**

**Camp Fire Youth**



# PEER-TO-PEER ENGAGEMENT

An important aspect of collaboration is understanding the contributions of each member of the team. At Camp Fire, we ensure that each youth can contribute their ideas and skills. Youth have opportunities to mentor, lead, or coach other youth. They also adopt interdependent roles that are essential for achieving their goals.

The science of learning and development deems learning environments that include ample social interaction as “rich,” and it teaches us that these social interactions are vital for brain development. Peer-to-peer engagement is a clear example of how Camp Fire is providing a rich learning environment for youth.



“This week in camp, we had a treasure hunt, and they had a whole camp working together.”

Camp Fire Youth





## At Camp Fire, we strive to build relationships with families and school-day teachers.

**Building trusting relationships across learning environments, like school and home, is a best practice informed by the science of learning and development.**

### **Family Engagement**

Our families are deeply invested in the well-being of their children. By sending their children to Camp Fire, they exhibit an enormous amount of trust in us. We honor that trust by inviting parents to experience Camp Fire in new ways and to authentically partner with us.

Camp Fire Green Country, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, hosts family weekends. This is an opportunity for all members of the family to visit the resident camp for free and participate in camp activities. Not only is this an opportunity for families to get to know Camp Fire better, but also it is an opportunity to bring families closer together.

We offer family engagement workshops in which we ask caregivers to reflect on their relationships with their children and develop strategies to strengthen these powerful bonds. These workshops are also opportunities for adult champions to learn about and recognize the unique strengths of families and their cultures.

### **School-Day Teacher Involvement**

School-day teachers are critical partners in promoting learning and development. We ensure that school-day teachers understand our commitment to youth, and we find opportunities to work with them to enhance learning for young people.

For example, the school-based middle school program at Camp Fire Columbia, in Portland, Oregon, has adult champions who act as school liaisons. They can drop-in on classes, meet with school-day teachers, and visit youth during lunch.





## We value equity and we wield developmental relationships as an equity strategy.

To ensure that our commitment to equity is apparent in our relationships and all aspects of our work:

**We minimize the “-isms” that we know many youth face.** Adult champions are trained to understand the impacts of racism, inequality, prejudice, and stereotypes on young people's ability to learn and thrive. They also model and facilitate open dialogue about diversity, access, and inclusion.

**We celebrate culture.** Our curriculum and activities demonstrate respect for the home culture of youth, even as we learn how to avoid appropriating cultural traditions.

**We adopt a strength-based approach to family engagement.** Our youth and families bring numerous assets to our programs that we deeply value.

**We provide diverse and equitable environments that are accessible to all.** Because we are keenly aware of how systems and policies shape learning environments, we examine our policies and practices to ensure that we are not marginalizing youth or unintentionally harming the communities we serve.



**One of our current inclusion goals is to increase access to Camp Fire resident camps for youth living in underserved communities, youth with disabilities, and youth who identify as LGBTQ+.**



## Camp Fire's Statement of Inclusion

Camp Fire believes in the dignity and the intrinsic worth of every human being. We welcome, affirm, and support young people and adults of all abilities and disabilities, experiences, races, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, religion and nonreligion, and any other category people use to define themselves or others.

We strive to create safe and inclusive environments that celebrate diversity and foster positive relationships.



# IDENTITY-SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

We know from the science of learning and development that creating a supportive learning environment means having identity-safe environments. These diverse, equitable environments are inclusive of all young people. At these places, young people know they can bring their whole selves and feel valued. We ensure that youth have identity-safe spaces in several ways, all intended to disrupt the marginalization of youth and honor the lived experience of our young people.

Adult champions promote youth agency, use gender-neutral language, and encourage conversations about race and discrimination. Our adult champions have rich cultural awareness and knowledge, which they use to help youth learn from others who have different backgrounds and perspectives from their own.

Providing identity-safe environments also means recognizing each young person's individuality and meeting their needs so that they can fully engage in the Camp Fire experience. This requires that we remove barriers—physical, financial, logistical, and more—that keep youth from participating. It also requires that we adapt as needed to match the physical, social, and intellectual needs of each young person.

**"I feel like whatever background you come from, whatever your past is, it's OK to come here, because you have a community that's a lot of different people."**

Camp Fire Youth



**"Camp is just really fun because you can just be yourself there. Everyone's going to be their selves."**

Camp Fire Youth

We know that inclusive, supportive policies and practices shape strong relationship development. Antibullying and antidiscrimination policies are examples of our commitment to creating identity-safe environments, as are the intentional hiring practices we use to build a Camp Fire team that reflects the youth we serve—racially, linguistically, and culturally.



# EQUIPPING STAFF WITH ESSENTIAL SKILLS AND PRACTICES

To support young people to develop strong, impactful relationships, we must invest in professional development for adults who work with youth. This is backed by the science of learning and development as well as our experience delivering programs. Professional development should be well-rounded, promoting an understanding of research as well as best practices. Our philosophy is that to support the whole child, we must support the whole adult.

With that in mind, we provide comprehensive and ongoing professional learning to our adult champions that emphasizes our focus on relationships and is grounded in a continuous quality improvement process. We use the Camp Fire Learning Lab—an online platform teeming with interactive trainings—to ensure that adults can access relevant and timely training. Adult champions can dive deeper into what they have learned through reflection and dialogue with their colleagues.

“

Training from my council is very thorough, and I always feel like I am heard and that what I do is important.”

Seasonal Staff, 1–3 years of experience





# EQUIPPING STAFF WITH ESSENTIAL SKILLS AND PRACTICES

Our adult champions apply training and research to develop strong, impactful relationships with youth. They use powerful relational strategies that build upon one another. At Camp Fire, youth learn how to build relationships from adult champions who:

- ✓ **Express care and respect;**
- ✓ **Encourage youth to share their passions and life experiences;**
- ✓ **Use a strength-based approach;**
- ✓ **Model and teach communication skills, including active listening and conflict resolution;**
- ✓ **Provide encouragement and feedback;**
- ✓ **Set high expectations; and**
- ✓ **Show up for youth by being accessible, empowering youth, and advocating on their behalf.**

These strategies are the seeds that adult champions plant to nourish budding relationships that, over time, grow to be strong, impactful long-term connections. Adult champions understand firsthand the benefits of these relational strategies because they use them with one another.



**91% of staff agree that they have received the training necessary to implement Camp Fire programming effectively.**

**2019 Camp Fire Evaluation**



**We have the unshakable belief that all youth have the capacity to achieve success both in and outside our programs.**

We invest in relationships because we understand their importance from our 110 years of experience and the compelling science of learning and development. Our journey to develop strong, impactful relationships that help youth thrive continues. The strategies we currently use will be refined as we learn more and undoubtedly new research will emerge.

And, at Camp Fire, we believe that youth are leaders now! They are already shaping and contributing to the world. We combine strong, impactful relationships and enriching programs to put youth on the path toward positive development and long-term societal impact.

We are grateful for the opportunity to share our journey, and we are excited about the possibility of sharing more about the school-year programs, teen service and leadership opportunities, and camp and outdoor education that we offer. These programs are the context in which impactful relationships unfold and contribute to the success of youth.

**Contact us to learn more about Camp Fire**



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## Science of Learning and Development

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- Science of Learning and Development Alliance. (2020, May). *How the science of learning and development can transform education: Initial findings*. Washington, DC: Author.

## Camp Fire

- Thrive{ology} Framework—Three to Thrive:** Thrive{ology} is grounded in three research-based areas of adult practice that are proven to contribute to youth success. The Three to Thrive document provides an overview of these three areas—Thriving Indicators, Methods to Succeed, and Adult Champions—and expectations for implementation.
- Camp Fire Program Framework Guidebook:** This Guidebook contains quotes from youth on their journey to self-discovery, a checklist to determine how many indicators your program meets, and best-practice research with references.
- Camp Fire Research-Based Logic Model:** Camp Fire’s research-based logic model explains how youth experiences produce near-term learning outcomes that result in long-term benefits and societal impacts.
- Hatchuel Tabernik and Associates (HTA) Camp Fire Evaluation Spring/Summer 2019:** Camp Fire national headquarters contracted with HTA in 2018–19 to evaluate Camp Fire outcomes based on the Thrive{ology} Framework. The focus of this evaluation is to outline how Camp Fire councils and direct delivery staff are impacting youth, and to measure positive youth outcomes.