

The Importance of Social Learning

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Whenever I am asked what makes Humanex Academy such a special environment I consistently respond with examples of social learning that I observe each and every day. For it is the dynamic social environment within the Humanex community, that facilitates and provides motivation for learning in all areas. Principle among these, are the development of age appropriate relationships.

It has been my observation, that on average, those enrolling at Humanex Academy have social skill deficits that are four to six years behind same-age peers. It has also been my observation that these developmental gaps narrow as these adolescents and aspiring young adults learn to navigate this social community. While the learning involved never occurs without some level of setback or the need to resolve conflict and disagreements, it must be understood as a natural and essential part of growth in this area. In fact, these are experiences that must occur if one is to develop the self-knowledge required to maintain healthy relationships throughout life.

Adolescence and young adulthood is a time to refine and develop skills needed for healthy adult relationships, and a time for refining one's sense of identity in a social world. That sense of who one is, what one believes, and where one belongs. Social and identity development work hand-in-hand, and neither occur overnight. Instead, a process of trial and error, based in real-life experience is required – A process of social learning. This is where one can refine skills by receiving social feedback, and through practice. It is through this experiential learning that identity development occurs and where everyone finds an identity that fits both one's internal sense of who one is (or wants to be), with an outward social identity that can be embraced/accepted by others. This is essential to the formation of healthy relationships, and is something that we all must navigate as we grow and develop.

It is important to note that this process of trial-and-error cannot occur in a vacuum. Instead, it requires peers. More specifically, it requires peers who are going through this same process of experimentation. Where there is a need and desire to interact, an understanding that everyone is working to build skills, and opportunity for mutual affirmation or feedback – even in the form of rejection when behaviors are unacceptable or inappropriate. This is what happens at Humanex Academy, and in my estimation is the magic behind much of the growth and development that occurs.

As many need outside instruction to learn from these real-world experiences, Humanex does more than just set the stage for learning. Coaching must also occur and is provided through structured groups, mentoring, and ongoing supportive coaching as students interact with staff and navigate relationships with peers. This combination of opportunity with real-time support and feedback is in fact critical.

While it may seem like there are an infinite number of skills that must be in place before healthy relationships can be maintained, we focus on eight key skills that I believe are foundational for all types of relationships. These are:

1. Treat friends the way you would like to be treated.
2. Find common interests.
3. Keep a friend's confidence. They will quickly learn that you are talking about them, or sharing personal information that was not yours to share.
4. Pay attention when your friends are talking.
5. Be willing to share.
6. Take turns – both in conversations and activities.
7. Be truthful.
8. Stick up for your friends.

By always using these key points as a framework for understanding peers and peer relationships, there is a structure for understanding successes and setbacks when they occur. This approach also provides a clear direction for what to do next. The experience of dynamic social learning then becomes less threatening and in my experience, there is a greater willingness to step out of one's comfort zone – to face the possibility of limited success.

Whether your son or daughter is currently attending another school, is in the process of enrolling at Humanex Academy, or is already one of our students, I suggest that you find a way of supporting their social and identity development by reinforcing these essential skills to the formation of healthy relationships.