



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS  
OF AMERICA

# Supporting Adult Capacity Through Organizational Practices at Boys & Girls Clubs of America



**The science of learning and development is an emerging, cross-disciplinary body of knowledge that highlights the importance of contexts, relationships, and experiences in shaping how young people learn and develop.<sup>1</sup>**

Adults play an essential role in supporting young people's learning and development across all settings.<sup>2</sup> Supporting the adults who work with young people requires a coordinated system for professional development, resources and tools.<sup>3</sup>

In 2016, Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) invested in the capacity of their staff to provide high-quality programs for young people through the Club Experience Initiative. In this brief, we highlight cross-disciplinary findings from the science of learning and development that underscore the critical role adults play in supporting young people's learning and development. We highlight BGCA's efforts to build adult capacity and share lessons learned from BGCA's investment in their staff who work with young people.

## Supporting Youth Requires Supporting Adults

Key findings from the [Science of Learning and Development Alliance](#) suggest five practice components for educational settings that are essential for young people's learning and development and address the whole young person.

1. Positive developmental relationships
2. Environments filled with safety and belonging
3. Rich learning experiences
4. Development of knowledge, skills, mindsets and habits
5. Integrated support systems

The first four components underscore the powerful role adults play in bolstering young people's learning and development. The last component – **integrated support systems** – asserts that it takes coordinated efforts within and across systems to support the whole young person. Similarly, adults require support (e.g., trainings, resources, tools), time for preparation, and connections to others in similar roles to design and facilitate high-quality learning environments for young people.



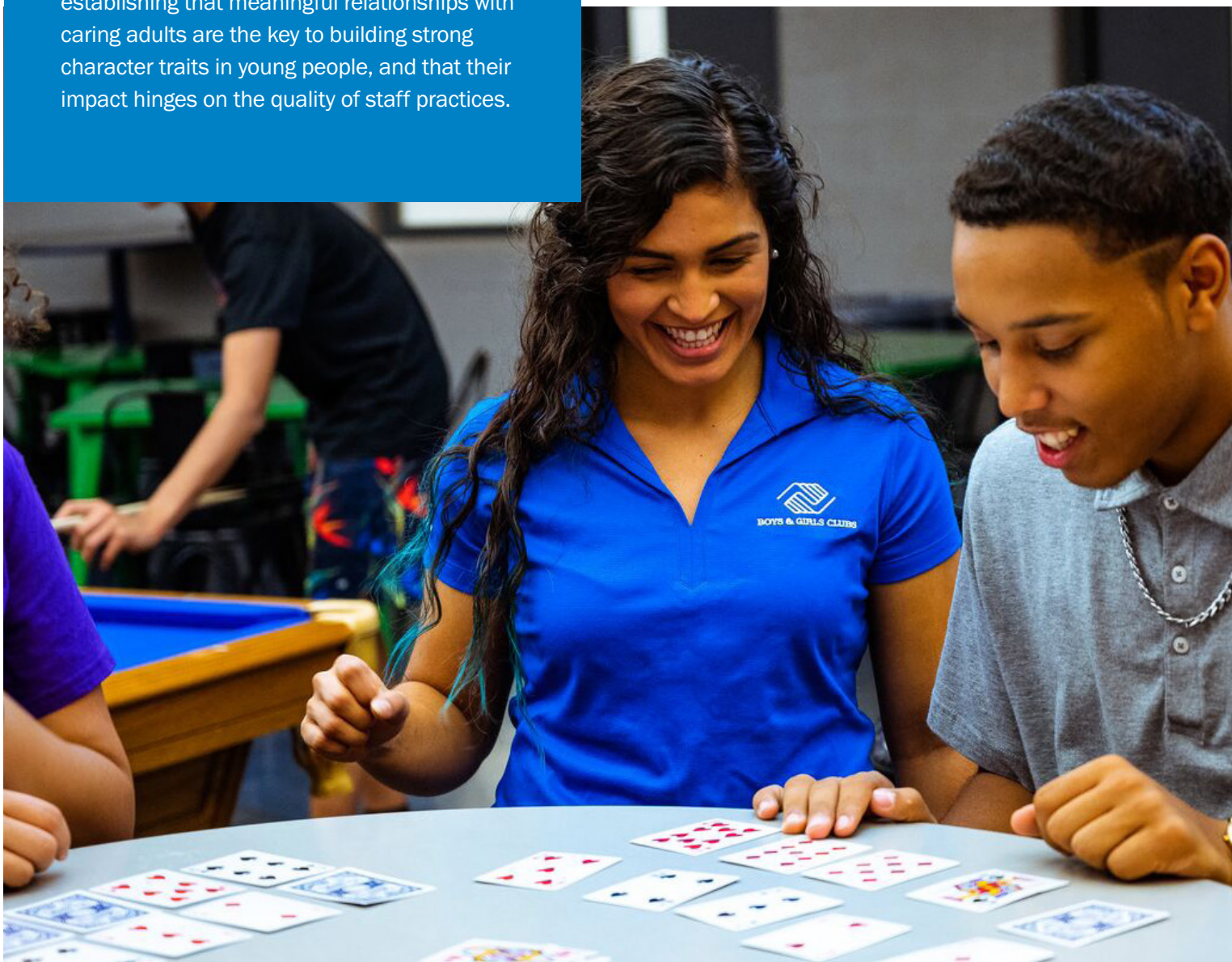
## Supporting Adult Capacity at BGCA

BGCA's goal for the Club Experience Initiative was to ensure all youth are receiving the best possible programming for developing the next generation of leaders. BGCA recognized the power of **positive developmental relationships**. The organization realized that to improve youth outcomes, they needed to promote high-quality youth development program practices. But before they could do that, they needed to invest in their staff.

BGCA launched their Club Experience Initiative to 1) raise awareness of the Club Experience and 2) build the capacity of staff. The Club Experience Initiative is guided by research establishing that meaningful relationships with caring adults are the key to building strong character traits in young people, and that their impact hinges on the quality of staff practices.

To bring about the changes in behaviors, systems and culture that are needed to continuously improve quality, BGCA identified three organizational practices that support adult capacity building: developing accessible tools rooted in practice, modeling behavior at all levels of the organization, and fostering cross-club partnerships to support youth and meet their needs.

In the following sections, we explore how these organizational practices reflect the five components to optimize conditions for learning and development and address the whole young person.



## Developing Accessible Tools Rooted in Practice

BGCA developed several practice and research-based tools that reflect how clubs operate. But, rather than leading with the research, BGCA worked with staff to understand the practices they use in their clubs to design and implement **rich learning experiences and pathways** for young people. BGCA then shared with staff the youth development research that supported those practices. By leading with practice, BGCA situated their staff as youth development experts, with relevant and valued perspectives, experiences, and knowledge. Then BGCA underscored that message by following up those discussions with the research that supported what staff already deemed to be good practice.

Through these conversations and crowdsourcing with staff, BGCA created the [Youth Development Toolbox](#) (YD Toolbox), a free toolbox for the youth development field that can be easily accessed and shared. For example, the YD Toolbox includes activities for community building among youth in programs or clubs, such as grouping strategies that promote **environments filled with safety and belonging**, cooperative learning, and collaboration. The YD Toolbox is available not only to BGCA staff, but all adults who want to improve their practice. The toolbox is available as an app so youth development professionals can access content on the go.

## Modeling Behavior at All Levels of the Organization

BGCA realized that they could model elements of high-quality programming outside the club walls to develop staff **knowledge, skills, mindsets and habits**. National office staff began running meetings that included community-building time at the beginning of the meeting, and time for reflection at the end of the meeting.

BGCA implemented a “nothing about us without us” policy to elevate staff voice in decision making. This meant including a broader group of staff in continuous quality improvement conversations. It also included creating an **environment filled with safety and belonging** so all adults could participate meaningfully in improvement conversations. For example, the Truckee Meadows Club in Reno, Nevada decided to pull in all adults who interacted with young people in the club to examine quality data. The team brought in not only the adults leading the program, but also the bus driver and staff member who served meals, to include them in the conversation about how the Club was serving young people.

## Fostering Cross-Club Partnerships to Support the Whole Young Person

BGCA's professional development provided an avenue for natural partnerships between clubs where none previously existed. For example, two clubs in Birmingham, Alabama are situated close to each other. One club historically employed Black staff and had Black participants, while the other historically employed White staff and had White youth participants. Despite being geographically close, the clubs operated independently – they did not share staff, and young people engaged with one club. BGCA organized training and planning events for the two clubs to participate in together. The two clubs in Birmingham then shared trained staff and participated in planning and improvement discussions together. Over time, this led to the clubs sharing staff across clubs and young people participating in programs across clubs. The two clubs partnered to bring in mental health resources for their young people to provide **integrated support systems to address the whole young person.**

## Summary

The science of learning and development highlights the essential role adults play in shaping young people's learning and development. Adults have the potential to create the essential conditions for learning and development that address the whole young person. Adults, like young people, need optimized conditions for learning and development. Organizations can provide system level supports, through professional development, resources, and tools. In doing so, organizations build adults' capacity to address the whole young person. BGCA recognized that caring about young people means caring about the adults who work with young people. BGCA serves as an example of a youth development organization that, aligned with science of learning and development, invested in those adults to build their capacity and skills, and learned lessons about what it takes to support adult practice at the organizational level.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L. & Rose, T. (2019). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 307-337. DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649; Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L. & Rose, T. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(1), 6-36. DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650; Osher, D., Pittman, K., Young, J., Smith, H., Moroney, D., & Irby, M. (2020). *Thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning & development: A more powerful conceptualization of the contributors to youth success*. Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment.

<sup>2</sup> Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L. & Rose, T. (2019). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 307-337. DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649; Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L. & Rose, T. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(1), 6-36. DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650

<sup>3</sup> Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L. & Rose, T. (2019). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 307-337. DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649; Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L. & Rose, T. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(1), 6-36. DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650

<sup>4</sup> Darling-Hammond, L.; Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B. & Osher, D. (2019). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97-140. DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791



A unified effort supported by the Forum for Youth Investment, the National Urban League, and the American Institutes for Research