



# Nature-Based Youth Programs

## Building Adult Capacity

### High-quality nature-based youth programs provide diverse learning and developmental benefits for young people.

A distinguishing characteristic of high-quality programs is that they structure program access and design learning experiences in ways that align with science of learning and development. Programs that align with science prioritize positive relationships, recognize the uniqueness of each young person's learning and developmental course, and provide young people with opportunities to build skills and reflect on and make sense of their experiences.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>

As we write this in winter 2020, young people around the world are grappling with pressing social and environmental challenges.<sup>4</sup> It feels essential in this moment that adults designing and implementing these programs ensure that all young people can access opportunities to be in natural settings, and that the learning experiences the programs provide are safe, supportive, and developmentally affirming. However, nature-based youth programs often do not reach diverse young people. Studies show that historically, these programs have disproportionately served white, male, middle- to upper-class, and able-bodied youth.<sup>5</sup>

**The science of learning and development is a multidisciplinary effort to integrate research from diverse disciplines.<sup>6</sup>**

This body of evidence covers biological, social, and behavioral processes, among others, that influence human learning and development. In addition, this scientific knowledge describes the individual developmental processes as well as the environmental and contextual influences on learning and development. As a convergence of findings from these disciplines, the science of learning and development can guide youth-serving systems in supporting all young people to thrive.



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Nature-based programs need to be designed in ways that are reflective and inclusive of diverse groups of young people. Focusing on transforming and preparing the adult workforce is a critical way to address the barriers and disparities that young people experience in nature-based youth programs. Adults are essential levers in programs: They can ensure that young people have experiences that promote learning and development, determine how young people can access opportunities, and provide learning experiences that are relevant, welcoming, and affirming for *all* youth.<sup>7,8,9</sup> To accomplish these goals, **nature-based youth programs must prioritize staff learning and development so that adults have the capacity and understanding to expand access and provide transformative learning experiences for all young people.**

For instance, positive relationships (including relationships between youth and adults) are one of the most important ways to reinforce young people's unique journeys as they learn and grow.<sup>10</sup> Although this sounds simple, we cannot assume that these relationships will automatically form in programs. Adults need the skills and understanding to establish the types of enduring and trusting relationships with youth that encourage positive development.<sup>11</sup>

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Connecting program standards to staff learning and development requirements ensures staff have the skills and understanding to implement quality programs. **NatureBridge** connects quality practice rubrics to staff training and assessment pathways as part of a culture of learning. **Outward Bound** links their national professional development approach to their continuous quality improvement system.

This brief is part of a three-part series focused on connecting **the science of learning and development** to the approaches and impacts of youth serving nature-based organizations. The series includes *Why Does Nature Based Programming Matter*, *Robust Equity in Nature Based Programming*, and *Nature Based Youth Programs: Building Adult Capacity*.

*The three briefs are based on a series of interviews with three prominent experiential and nature-based organizations:*

**NatureBridge** provides overnight, hands-on environmental science programs, taking children and teens to national parks to experience the wonder and science of the natural world, connect with peers, discover themselves, and develop a lasting relationship with the environment.

**Outward Bound** serves youth to adults through challenging learning expeditions that inspire strength of character, leadership, and service to others, both in and out of the classroom. Outward Bound provides nationwide programming through 11 chartered sites and more than 1,000 courses. Thompson Island Outward Bound, one of the 11 sites, partners with Boston Public Schools to provide free outdoor education programs to students on the island's 204 acres of preserved land in Boston Harbor.

**Student Conservation Association** is America's conservation corps, building the next generation of conservation leaders and inspiring lifelong stewardship of the environment and communities. Members engage in hands-on service to protect and restore national parks, marine sanctuaries, cultural landmarks, and community green spaces in all 50 states.

A “whole person” approach to developing and building the capacity of adult program staff views them not as vehicles for program implementation but as “complex individuals with strengths and challenges doing work that requires nuanced and responsive interactions with youth.”<sup>12</sup> Programs that are successful in supporting young people’s learning and development have high-quality staff, but staff do not arrive at a program on day 1 with all the skills and understanding they need to do their jobs well. Successful programs prepare their staff to do the work by investing in organizational supports for staff, as well as opportunities for professional learning, skill building, and reflection.<sup>13, 14, 15, 16</sup> Organizations can provide these types of professional supports and opportunities by promoting informal and formal mentorship and coaching, encouraging peer learning, cultivating a culture of learning and continuous improvement, and integrating learning and development into jobs and workdays.<sup>17, 18</sup> These types of opportunities can boost staff preparedness for challenging environments, as well as their job satisfaction and retention and motivation to remain committed to the youth development field.<sup>19, 20</sup> These workforce factors are necessary for ensuring better outcomes for young people. Ultimately, an investment in staff is an investment in young people.

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In 2020, the **Student Conservation Association** (SCA) launched a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion multimedia book group. About 30% of staff participate in this group. SCA’s chief executive officer leads the group, helping to boost engagement and buy-in.

As programs design staff professional development and supports, one focus area should be ensuring that programs are reflective and respectful of youth’s cultures and identities. Nature-based programs should ensure that staff are equipped to work with and welcome diverse young people. These actions should prioritize adults’ cultural awareness, proficiency, and responsiveness.

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**Outward Bound** partnered with the Partnerships in Education and Resilience Institute to develop a program observation rubric that examines the quality of the program environment and instruction quality. Staff use the rubric as part of a continuous quality improvement system that pairs program observation with supportive and individualized coaching.

In addition to barriers and disparities for youth in program access and participation, the adult workforce within the nature-based youth program field is nearly all white.<sup>21</sup> To date, most progress on diversity has been related to gender and has principally benefitted white women.<sup>22</sup> To provide truly reflective, equitable, and inclusive learning environments and experiences for diverse populations of young people, nature-based programs must acknowledge these gaps and further evolve by continuing initiatives to diversify the adult workforce.<sup>23</sup> In addition to ongoing and proactive diversity measures for workplace and hiring practices, programs need to ensure that all staff learn to work with youth in ways that are culturally conscious and responsive.<sup>24</sup> This attention to cultural diversity, equity, and inclusion is critical to positive youth development because it creates a sense of belonging and identity safety within programs. In addition, these types of approaches recognize the strengths and meet the needs of all youth.<sup>25, 26, 27</sup> When young people feel accepted and validated, and when their prior knowledge and experiences are embraced and valued, they are more engaged and prepared to learn.<sup>28, 29</sup>

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To better prepare staff to intentionally and equitably incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) practices, **NatureBridge** convened a working group of residential environmental learning center organizations. Collectively, the group created [Grow-outside.org](http://Grow-outside.org), an SEL toolkit for residential environmental education programs, which has applications for program improvement across the environmental education field.

It can be challenging to provide staff with sufficient knowledge and skills to accommodate the norms, values, and beliefs of youth and be culturally responsive to different youth backgrounds and resulting assets and needs.<sup>30, 31, 32, 33</sup> Several promising approaches have emerged. For instance, youth development programs have successfully supported diverse and underrepresented youth by using a community-based approach to staff development.<sup>34</sup> This approach recognizes the local context and can broker relationships among youth-serving sectors (e.g., schools, libraries, social service agencies) to better provide workforce-enhancing opportunities. These opportunities include establishing training standards, assessing impact, and providing organizational supports for staff.

Adults working in youth development programs are essential in promoting environments and opportunities that keep youth safe, supported, and appropriately engaged and challenged. When organizations make investments to build the capacity of their staff, they are ultimately committing to improving outcomes for participating youth. Adults need certain resources and competencies to work with young people effectively, including the knowledge and skills to work with young people with diverse backgrounds. When nature-based youth programs make changes to ensure that learning experiences and settings are genuinely reflective, equitable, and inclusive, these programs have the potential to be truly transformative for young people.

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**NatureBridge** views their instructional staff as partners and experts in their field. The organization is trying out team teaching and frontline coaching roles for more experienced staff members.



## Endnotes

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