



Putting the Science Into Practice

*Community Programs
Supporting Whole Child
Development*

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Our understanding of human development has grown by leaps and bounds in the last decade, driven by scientific findings across several research areas. These findings shine a spotlight on the role that community programs like afterschool and summer programs play in supporting youth to thrive. Community programs are diverse in terms of where, when, how, and with whom they operate. **But the shared components of all community programs are the same ones that science tells us are critical for learning and development:** Community programs offer safety and belonging, and foster rich developmental relationships among peers as well as with the adults who staff the program.

While many have considered K–12 in-school education to be the primary setting for learning and development, the [Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development \(SEAD\)](#) elevated the point that learning can (and does!) happen anywhere. The idea that learning happens everywhere expands the way we think about the places, spaces, and people that contribute to thriving, and highlights the role that community programs play in supporting the whole child, young person, family, and community.

In the 2019 brief, [The Science of Learning and Development in Afterschool Systems and Settings](#), we explored the alignment between the new science findings and prior research on afterschool programs, and described what afterschool systems and settings could do to bolster practices that support learning and development. In this brief, we describe the essential components for whole child learning and development, and share examples of how community programs are putting that science into practice.

Science of Learning and Development

The science of learning and development is a cross-disciplinary body of knowledge that tells us how people learn and develop. It provides many powerful lessons that can transform education systems, advance equity, and can help every young person thrive. This body of knowledge comes from the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) [Alliance](#), a partnership of leading education research, practice, and policy organizations.





Community **Programs**

Community programs offer a diverse set of learning and development opportunities across settings—from public parks, to community centers, to libraries and museums, to schools. They operate before, during, and after school and on the weekends, during the school year and in the summer. Community programs span different sectors, including nonprofits, faith organizations, employers, business, sports, civic and arts associations, and public agencies focused on recreation, health, safety, and learning. These organizations receive funding from multiple public and private sources, and they are staffed by a range of adults, from volunteers in the community to trained youth workers to school-day paraprofessionals and teachers. These adults meet youth where they are: in schools, parks and recreation departments, community centers, detention centers, homeless shelters, and hospitals. All community programs have the potential to apply current science to create spaces where young people learn, develop, and thrive, despite the broad range of characteristics of these settings. **This diversity is what makes community programs an ideal setting for the application of science into practice.**

National youth-serving organizations, like the ones featured in this brief ([4-H](#), [Boys & Girls Clubs of America](#), [Camp Fire](#), [Playworks](#), [Outward Bound USA](#), [Student Conservation Association](#), and [NatureBridge](#)) have enormous reach into communities through their local affiliates. These programs employ a strengths-based approach to working with young people, connect with families, and offer opportunities for young people to learn and develop.



Putting the Science into Practice

The SoLD Alliance describes five components that are essential for young people to learn, develop, and thrive:

- Positive developmental relationships
- Environments filled with safety and belonging
- Rich learning experiences
- Development of knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits
- Integrated support systems

While each component is important in and of itself, it is the integration of the five components within a learning setting that best supports learning, development, and thriving so that the whole of the learning setting is greater than the sum of the parts.

In the sections that follow we 1) describe each of the five components and how it relates to what we know about community programs and 2) provide examples of what each looks like in practice, including ways in which community programs are shifting policies, structures, and priorities in their organizations and programming to better align with the science findings.

Positive Developmental **Relationships**

Meaningful and respectful relationships are critical for learning and development. Community programs prioritize relationships as a core part of their programs, and often hire staff with this explicit purpose in mind. Developmental relationships help young people discover who they are, develop the ability to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. We can all agree that relationships are critical in all of our lives. The trick is defining what a positive developmental relationship looks like, and ensuring that all young people (and staff) can engage in intentional relationship building. In this section, we explore a few examples of intentional relationship building in community programs.

Community programs can use the [Search Institute developmental relationships framework](#) to think and talk about their approach to relationship building. Developmental relationships include five elements that are critical to young people and their relationship development: 1) expressing care (show me that I matter to you), 2) challenging growth (push me to keep getting better), 3) providing support (help me complete tasks and achieve goals), 4) sharing power (treat me with respect and give me a say), and 5) expanding possibilities (connect me with people and places that broaden my horizon). Community programs can create positive developmental relationships by providing young people with opportunities to explore their interests and engage in meaningful experiences that foster learning and development, while also providing opportunities for authentic youth voice and choice.

Another way to foster positive relationships between adults and young people is to employ mentors. For example, young people in some 4-H programs are paired with an adult mentor who works with them on projects. By working on projects together, the youth and adults develop meaningful and reciprocal relationships through shared interests and a common goal. A mentor relationship also allows staff to get to know young people well enough to connect them with other interests or opportunities outside of the program.

Community programs can also develop positive relationships with youth by intentionally supporting staff in developing such relationships. One way Outward Bound USA emphasizes the importance of fostering positive relationships is through practices described in their observational rubric, which is used for continuous improvement discussions and planning. The rubric emphasizes practical cues like tone (using a friendly, respectful tone with youth); attentiveness (listening to youth with acceptance and curiosity); and mutual engagement (engaging in the learning experience by learning from youth). The information included in the rubric allows staff to have meaningful conversations about what it looks like to intentionally develop positive relationships with young people.

Community programs can support intentional relationship building by aligning to the developmental relationships framework, supporting mentoring relationships, and ensuring that relationships are at the core of the organization's quality improvement processes.

Environments Filled With **Safety and Belonging**

Community programs provide young people a sense of belonging and security to try new things and engage in skill building and learning. They do this by creating developmentally rich settings and safe and supportive spaces that promote belonging, where young people feel comfortable being themselves (what we refer to as “identity-safe spaces”). Many community programs have adopted a continuous quality improvement process to assess and improve their programs and ensure that they are safe and supportive. A continuous quality improvement process often includes observational assessments, improvement planning, and targeted training and coaching. Such strategies can improve instruction and increase staff retention.

High-quality community programs foster safety and belonging through providing consistent expectations or norms and culturally relevant programming. Creating a sense of safety and belonging looks different in different kinds of community programs. For youth-serving organizations in more traditional settings (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs), adults can ensure there are established routines, as well as time provided for youth and adults to establish norms collaboratively. Depending on the length of the session and how often they meet, the group may work over several sessions to establish their norms. For example, the group may take time every day for the first week to discuss and contribute to shared norms that they then hang in a prominent place in the program space.

Some youth-serving organizations offer shorter term experiences and engagement, like residential and nature-based programs, for example. In these programs, adults have different strategies to make sure young people feel safe even though their time in the program is shorter. Staff at NatureBridge do this by starting with an orientation to the campus (e.g., pointing out things such as cabins/sleeping arrangements, bathrooms, and eating areas) so that youth know where things are and feel comfortable in the physical space. Then they jump into name games and other team-building activities to help youth and staff connect with each other right away.

Community program leaders support staff in creating environments filled with safety and belonging by ensuring there are structures and processes in place to support time for professional learning, sharing, and collaboration. For example, staff at Camp Fire regularly reflect on their policies to ensure the policies support youth rather than marginalize them. Camp Fire incorporated antibullying and antidiscrimination policies into their organization to help create identity-safe environments for all young people. The organization also revisited their hiring practices to ensure their staff members reflect the youth they serve.



Community programs can promote safety and belonging in their settings by establishing routines, developing shared norms, and ensuring organizational policies support all young people in their learning and development.



Rich Learning **Experiences**

Youth are more likely to be engaged in rich learning experiences when they feel emotionally safe and can rely on trusting relationships. Rich, transformative learning experiences go beyond rote instruction by providing opportunities for young people to explore, engage, and make meaning with new and existing knowledge. Community program providers embed rich learning experiences (e.g., STEM, service learning) through hands-on, project-based, and experiential learning. Additionally, community programs' history of youth development suggests they are practiced in intentionally designing activities that match where participants are in their development (i.e., developmental fit).

Community programs provide great opportunities for young people to explore their interests in ways that are interesting and engaging to them. We have all heard the young person (and you may have been that person!) asking why they need to learn certain subjects in school. Through the rich learning experiences that community programs provide, the subject matter from school comes to life in real and meaningful ways. Community programs provide authentic opportunities for young people to engage in activities and work collaboratively with their peers.

Through Student Conservation Association’s summer programs, young people work in small crews of about 10 youth (“members”) with two adult “leaders.” Crews work together over the summer on a collective conservation project at the community, regional, or national level. Young people in 4-H programs work on projects that capitalize on their interests and positively impact their communities. One participant in Virginia combined her interest in computer science with her passion to help others and improved the database and website for a local organization focused on food security. Small groups and projects that connect to youth interests are two strategies for providing rich learning experiences.

Community programs also authentically incorporate youth voice into their organizations and program planning. Organizations such as Camp Fire and 4-H have youth councils that regularly provide feedback to organizational leadership. For example, the Camp Fire National Office partners with the National Youth Advisory Cabinet, a group of 16- to 21-year-old leaders. These young leaders inform key program decisions, plan the youth track of the Camp Fire leadership conference, and direct new youth initiatives. Community programs have also developed local youth councils to inform, lead, and provide feedback on site-specific programs and initiatives.

Community programs support staff working with young people to ensure the adults have the proper training to engage young people in rich learning experiences. For example, the Camp Fire Learning Lab is an online learning platform with interactive trainings that provide comprehensive and ongoing professional learning to Camp Fire staff. Staff can access the Learning Lab for required baseline training sessions and also to dive deep into an interest or content area specialty. Student Conservation Association prioritizes strong team relationships and focuses leader and member training on supporting the skills and conditions that create a strong sense of community and belonging for crews, including key topics in justice, equity, and inclusion. This training includes facilitated opportunities like a staff-wide book club, scenario- or role-play-based learning, and workshops focused on holistic social, emotional, and mental wellness.

Community programs can provide rich learning experiences by offering hands-on and project-based activities that combine youth interests and passions, incorporating youth voice, and supporting adults through ongoing training and professional development so they are prepared to support young people in their learning.





Development of **Knowledge, Skills, Mindsets, and Habits**

Skill building needs to be integrated with the development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and practitioners should be intentional about creating opportunities to develop content-specific skills alongside mindsets and habits. Some community programs' recent adoption of social and emotional learning practices provides a primer in intentionally (i.e., purposeful) embedding social and emotional skill building into programming.


Community programs may choose to approach skill building in a variety of ways. Some community programs explicitly name each skill or competency that young people will be focusing on in activities (e.g., incorporating a teambuilding aspect into a game of basketball by requiring that all players must touch the ball at least once before anyone can score), while others may weave skills and competencies into activities (e.g., asking the cooking class to double a recipe to have enough snacks to feed all

participants). Playworks encourages problem solving and conflict resolution through games such as “Roshambo” or “Rock Paper Scissors.”

One way community programs can work with young people to develop social and emotional competencies and skills is to have young people set goals for themselves and then provide regular opportunities to check in about progress made toward those goals. At Student Conservation Association, youth participants write a letter to themselves at the beginning of the program detailing how they want to change by the end of the program. In this “letter to self,” they write about what new knowledge they would like to gain, new skills they would like to develop, and mindsets or habits they would like to adopt. The program leaders meet with youth regularly over the course of the program to check in and provide feedback.

Another way for community programs to work with young people both on academic skill building and developing skills, habits, and mindsets is through explicitly teaching both program content and social and emotional competencies at the same time. Adult mentors in some 4-H programs provide young people opportunities to practice what they have learned after teaching the program content. 4-H mentors also work with young people as “spark champions”—they make intentional efforts to support and encourage young people’s sparks or passions. For example, a young person in the 4-H Tech Wizards After-School program learned about opportunities available in the STEM fields. His mentor introduced him to a geospatial program that allowed him to create maps that visualize data and spark action in his community. He graduated from high school and now attends college, where he focuses on digital forensics.

Community programs are recognizing that for young people to develop knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits, the adult staff who work with young people also need support. The Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) realized they could support the development of staff skills by modelling elements of high-quality programming outside of programs. For example, national office staff now ensure there is time at the beginning of meetings for community building, and time at the end of meetings for reflection. BGCA also implemented a “nothing about us without us” policy to elevate staff in decision making by including a broader group of staff in continuous quality improvement conversations. For example, the Truckee Meadows Club in Reno, Nevada, included all adults who interacted with young people in the club to examine quality data. The team included 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.



Community programs can support the development of knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits through explicitly incorporating skill building into activities, encouraging young people to set goals and providing time to reflect on progress toward the goals, supporting adults in their own skill building, and revisiting organizational structures and processes to model best practices.

Integrated **Support Systems**

Schools and community programs can independently provide the essential conditions for learning and development. But in reality, youth experience multiple systems and settings in places where they live, learn, work, and play. **Youth need access to integrated and comprehensive systems of support to fully support their learning and development.** Ideally those supports are coordinated and aligned across community programs and schools. Community programs are connected to assets in the community and trusted by families, and therefore can serve as a referral source for coordination and alignment.

Of all the components discussed in this brief, integrated support systems may be the hardest for community programs to navigate. Community programs, like schools, cannot do it alone. Addressing the whole young person requires placing youth at the center and integrating supports around them so they feel supported, regardless of their setting. Addressing the whole person requires engaging with families and coordinating or partnering with schools, mental health organizations, juvenile justice, and other places and spaces where young people spend their time.



One successful strategy for coordinating systems of support is to partner directly with schools. Playworks provides schools with strategies and games to ensure safe and healthy play during recess and in the classroom. Playworks strategies connect teachers, staff, and students in ways that build relationships and foster a sense of safety and belonging by removing the power dynamic: through play, all players are equal and no one is an expert.

In addition to partnering with schools, Playworks also connects with families through Playworks at Home, which allows Playworks to send games home to families through packaged videos and instructions. The play that their children experience at school changes the family's relationship to the institution of school because it is fun, where their children want to be, and they feel cared for.

While it is necessary to coordinate at the organization level to ensure there is seamless integration between and among programs, community programs can also ensure their staff understand how to connect individual youth participants with needed supports. Outward Bound provides training for their staff to ensure staff members know when youth might need supports outside of what is provided in the program, and supports staff in making those connections to other services.



Community programs can support integrated systems of support by partnering with schools and families, and ensuring staff working with youth understand how to support young people outside of their program offerings.

Summary

The community programs we highlight in this brief provide examples of how community programs can put the components of whole child learning and development into practice.

Community programs can establish:

- **Positive developmental relationships** by aligning with the developmental relationships framework, supporting mentoring relationships, and ensuring that relationships are at the core of the organization's quality improvement processes.
- **Environments filled with safety and belonging** by establishing routines, developing shared norms, and ensuring organizational policies support all young people in their learning and development.
- **Rich learning experiences** by offering hands-on and project-based activities that combine youth interests and passions, incorporating youth voice, and supporting adults through ongoing training and professional development so they are prepared to support young people in their learning.

- **Development of knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits** by explicitly incorporating skill building into activities, encouraging young people to set goals and providing time to reflect on progress toward the goals, supporting adults in their own skill building, and revisiting organizational structures and processes to model best practices.
- **Integrated support systems** by partnering with schools and families, and ensuring staff working with youth understand how to support young people outside of their program offerings.

Each of the practice components are necessary to support the whole young person. When the practice components are fully integrated, community programs can provide a setting that truly supports young people's learning, development, and thriving. Community programs also recognize the importance of supporting the adults who work with young people through professional development, training, and resources.

We hope to continue collecting and sharing examples such as those described in this brief to highlight how community programs and other youth-serving organizations are putting the science of learning and development into practice.

Stay tuned for the **Community-based Learning and Development Opportunities Playbook**, developed by SoLD Alliance partners. The Playbook includes a comprehensive overview of community-based learning and development opportunities, a deep dive into the science and why it matters for community-based settings, and a comprehensive set of science-informed practices, accompanied by real-world examples,



Endnotes

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About the Readiness Projects

With an unwavering focus on youth potential, the Readiness Projects advance work informed by science and grounded in practice, supporting adults in all settings and systems across the diverse youth fields. The Forum for Youth Investment, the National Urban League, and the American Institutes for Research have united to devote our time, resources, and perspectives to stimulate equity-driven solutions and policies. With partners, we will accelerate work that demands equitable learning and development opportunities and builds on the strengths of people working at all levels to help children, youth, and young adults thrive.



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