

Chapter 5 | Staff and Programming

A final important element for a great day in the outdoors is excellent staff. In a national review of research, over half of the proven strategies to connect youth to the outdoors draw on the skills of programming and outreach staff.¹ Youth cannot access parks and trails on their own as easily as adults. Furthermore, programming intended for younger children is not appropriate for this age group because teens seek activities that are more challenging, independent, and peer-focused. Knowledgeable staff can provide the developmentally appropriate access to information and activities, thereby nurturing the connections between youth and the outdoors.

Working with so many high school students, it is hard to see young people who are not sure if they will be able to actually GO to college because of COVID or are worried about what their future holds. There is a lot of depression right now among high schoolers, and I am doing my best to make sure that those that I am working with are able to feel connected to something bigger than themselves and feel like they are putting positive things out into the world.

– Seth Eberle, Three Rivers Park District staff member

Programming staff from the regional park Implementing Agencies of Three Rivers Park District, Dakota County, Ramsey County, and Washington County worked with youth in programming that was collaboratively designed by youth-serving organizations, Council staff, and park agency staff. Based on observations of the youth response to the staff and the programming, the contributions of park staff were excellent, considering how youth later talked about them at the validity conversation events.²

An important question is *why and how* staff achieved these positive outcomes. Across all facets of the research, staff were observed to engage youth through sharing knowledge, sharing a love of the outdoors, and creating a context of respect and welcome.

Professional excellence in sharing knowledge and love of the outdoors

Without a guide, they don't understand what it is they are seeing. They will walk past without noticing things. A tree is just a tree. But with someone you know, you see the connection between mushrooms and trees. You learn categories of trees. There's a maple tree, a birch tree. They just wanted to know more and more.

– Adult Leader, Celestial Paladins

Park professionals who collaborated in this research had various job titles: program specialist, community engagement supervisor or specialist, arts educator, naturalist, natural resources coordinator, planner, and parks manager. Their expertise included outreach, naturalist skills, planning, and youth education.

Staff knowledge and enthusiasm contributed to positive connections throughout the programming. They provided answers in a friendly, inviting, and casual manner. Park staff did not condescend to youth. Youth asked questions such as “Is the fur from a real animal?” “Are there any dangerous animals here?” and “How much money does a naturalist get paid?”

These questions were treated with consideration and respect. Staff demonstrated desire to give information as sought. They encouraged curiosity, supported youth in asking questions, and helped youth feel more confident in parks.

For example, Program Specialist Ken Pelto with Ramsey County led a group of youth through a nature walk in the woods on a regional trail. By a show of hands, fewer than one-third of participants reported prior hiking experience. He guided youth off the trail for a closer look at the landscape, animal tracks, or plants along the creek. This information helped youth feel a sense of belonging and enhanced ability to enjoy the park. He showed them how to do leaf races in the creek and where they crossed paths with racoons. Specialist Pelto told the group that his ancestors were Finnish, and they used tree bark to make baskets.

Figure 14. Ramsey County naturalist points out distinctive characteristics of a tree leaf



An Asian Media Access member said that they were Hmong, and that their people made baskets, too. He said it was nice to know you could make baskets from this tree. Pelto took the time to stop and listen to the Asian Media Access member's cultural stories. Much of the time, the onus of responsibility of building cultural connections rests on people of color. He provided a space for diverse people to feel safe and create a commonality across cultures.

During the walk, Pelto pointed out transit stops and mountain bike trails, providing information that youth could use for future visits. He shared knowledge as it became applicable to a specific point in the programming. When the group passed a creek, Pelto said that the creek emptied into the Mississippi and that if trash or pollutants went into the water there, it would flow into the Mississippi and pollute those waters. The group encountered a pile of walnuts, and Ken showed the girls how to crack one open with his shoe and explained the process of growing/harvesting them. He continued this anecdotal education strategy throughout the hike.

How much does a skilled staff member contribute to youth learning? Council field notes indicated that staff provided many kinds of education, nurturing, and welcoming during their time with youth.

During the Celestial Paladins nature walk, Pelto provided resources to youth over 30 times in the course of 90 minutes, described in Table 7, next page. The types of contributions are listed in the first column . The frequency of these contributions is listed in the second column. Examples of the contribution type from across all in-park experiences and all educators are provided in the third column.

Table 7. A program specialist’s contributions to youth learning in 90 minutes

In a 90-minute walk, naturalist provided...	Number of times	Examples of contribution (across all five in-park experiences)
Nature education	17	Animal tracks and scat identification, water cycle, seed dispersal, species identification, animal adaptation, plant and fungi identification, bird migration.
Information about how to visit park	5	Transit access, activities available, cell phone charging and bathroom locations, how to apply for fee waivers, where to find bathrooms, clothing offered for inclement weather.
Games and new outdoor activities	4	Teaching how to do leaf races, photography composition, art collages, building fires, joining youth in open field pick-up games.
Cultural, historical, and social information	2	Social history of the park, how humans create things from natural materials, effects of pollution, information on possible park activities.
Personal connection about love of the outdoors	2	Storytelling about past outdoor experiences, sharing own personal first time of doing an outdoor activity.
Reassurance about safety	1	Animals typically seen in the park, dealing with burrs, explanation for sounds heard.
Answers to specific questions asked spontaneously by youth or adults	Youth questions throughout the day	Sample questions: How do people use this park? Does the creek freeze in winter? Are mushrooms edible? Is the pelt from a real squirrel?

Additional staff provided information on a variety of topics during all in-park activities, below.

Table 8. Additional park staff contributions to building a welcoming experience

Contribution	Examples Observed
Guidance/advice	Career possibilities in parks, offering to write letters of recommendation, offering transportation to teen board meetings.
Needed equipment	Ponchos, gloves, hats, cameras, binoculars.
Cultural inclusivity	Introducing flexible bonfire activity that groups could shape to their own cultural preferences. Adapting programming for youth who have experienced homelessness. Drawing on language fluency, empathy and personal experience to help youth feel at ease.
Acknowledgment of youth insights and knowledge	Youth opportunities to design programming, leadership structures that include youth. Teen Council-led programming. Listening and affirming stories told. Participating in gathering rituals designed by youth. Co-creating data analysis with youth. Affirming youth insights about park master planning. Affirming all efforts, even when the answer or outcome was unexpected, Use of “our” and “we” to refer to the staff member and the youth.

Youth connected with park staff across differences of age, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and gender. Staff were alert to the immediate context to gauge when and how to share expertise. Rather than moving through a pre-programmed list of activities, staff conducted pre-event planning but adapted the plans to specific contexts.

Youth were most responsive when there were no lecture-type presentations that did not seem to relate to the setting or to their concerns or interests. When staff paid close attention to context, youth responded with eager engagement. For example, Troop 100 later recalled that Dan McSwain, Washington County's Natural Resource Coordinator, "helped make the park better by teaching about erosion." Dan demonstrated skill in working with a range of youth responses to his questions. Council research field notes recorded this effort:

Dan emphasized that there were no wrong answers. He specifically asked for all answers and that they would figure out the correct one together. He stated he wanted to know what everyone was thinking. This approach encouraged conversation, and Dan made a point to pick out positives from each answer and encourage more input. After hearing all responses Dan provided the dictionary definition for things but never referred to the correct or wrong answers. After the dictionary definition, Dan noted that "our definition was probably more accurate." This use of "our" identified himself with the group and validated what they had to say while also providing the textbook answer in a way that didn't negate their contributions.

Naturalist McSwain responded with care when asked to explain his job and what his role and responsibilities were. Like Pelto at Battle Creek, personal involvement and sharing of personal perspectives and experience enhanced the bond. Parents and other supportive adults found this approach to be highly effective in teaching youth. One mother recounted the walk her daughter took with Dan:

We learned about erosion at the site where it is happening. I would like more nature education like this... I want her to have more knowledge about a lot of things... In the tour today, she was able to touch it, feel it, see it. It's one thing to learn about erosion in a classroom, but it's much better to see it here, to learn about it firsthand. She learned so much today. I learned so much today. Coming out and learning these things are so important.

The mother indicated that the tour and this experience gave her daughter broader exposure to important knowledge. "I want her to know lots of things [like this] so she knows [what] she can do."

In summary, park staff gave attention to both building relationships and sharing information. In addition to teaching about the natural world while youth were experiencing it, staff spent time asking youth about their prior experiences, listening to youth answers, sharing food with youth, participating in youth-led opening rituals, and engaging in casual conversation and joking. This balance contributed to creating a context of respect and welcome, discussed in the next section.

Creating a context of respect and welcome

A first-time youth park visitor faces a challenging situation. In addition to navigating a new space, they are asked to take direction and learn from a naturalist or educator whom they do not know. They are expected to listen meet other youth, and navigate a new outdoors setting. In contrast, park staff are familiar with the setting, are considered figures of authority, and have charge of the program agenda.

Considering the point of view of youth visitors, this meet-up can seem an uneven encounter, whether the youth is a seasoned Scout or a never-before-in-the-woods teen. However, in their programming, park and research staff responded genuinely to the young people, avoiding preconceptions about age, their knowledge, or level of interest.

The high degree of adaptability and accommodation they afforded the youth made the encounters highly effective because park staff created a context of respect and welcome. By the end of each visit, it was evident that the youth felt respected and welcomed. Youth jumped in to answer questions, asked questions, tried new experiences, listened when staff spoke, shared stories, shifted easily between play and attentiveness, relayed concerns to staff, and enthusiastically participated in activities. Youth did not exhibit behaviors that would indicate they felt unwelcome or disrespected.

The youth-park staff interactions reflected a welcoming, safe environment, where youth felt valued, respected, encouraged, and supported. One research source describes this sense of well-being as occurring in an environment where youth can *“be themselves, express their own creativity, voice their opinions in decision-making processes, try out new skills...and have fun in the process.”*³

Each of these elements of well-being were evident in the staff-youth experiences. First, staff demonstrated that the outdoors was a place where youth could be themselves and express their own creativity.

All in-park gatherings opened with a ritual that came from the respective organization itself. Research staff learned from organization members what gathering rituals they practiced, including how they typically start their meetings or outings.

Four of the five groups had regular gathering activities. At the beginning of the day’s visit, organization youth led their ritual to create a context of reciprocity and mutual learning between youth and parks staff.

For example, Celestial Paladins (Asian Media Access) brought their dance-stretch gathering ritual to Battle Creek Regional Park. In a circle, each person (dance troop member, Council staff, and supportive adults) guided the group in a stretch, and members shared how they were feeling that day. Different rituals opened the in-park experience of other groups, including a

Figure 15. Celestial Paladins conducting their opening ritual



Scout patrol check-in, question time, or sharing a favorite song. One group without an opening ritual participated in a bilingual art activity in which youth were invited to draw a picture illustrating a story about themselves.

The opening rituals established a safe, respectful, and interactive space. With this activity, youth and adults began their park visit with a shared familiarity and mutual learning. It conveying to youth that their organizational culture was welcome, and they were incorporating the park and research “culture” into their experience. The opening activities signaled to youth that their individual and collective identities were not “checked” at the park entrance, but rather integrated into their outdoor experience.

Second, the day’s programming reinforced the welcoming environment by inviting youth to voice their opinions. For example, Washington County parks planners explained the process of master planning and the key questions to be answered to successfully update the parks plan. After learning about the unique aspects of nature-based parks, youth contributed ideas and thoughts about specific aspects of the parks (preferred activities, most important features, needed amenities). Their opinions were asked for, treated with respect, and used to inform this research and park master planning processes.

Third, youth had an opportunity to try out new skills. For example, based on what the visiting organization wanted to learn, programming and outreach staff of Three Rivers Park District designed a day of photography and wildlife education. The youth group – Organization of Liberians in Minnesota – said that their young members valued competition, so activities incorporated a photo contest. As the youth learned techniques of photo composition, they practiced the skills, first in groups at indoor tables and then outside in small groups. Each group took a list for a photo scavenger hunt, the list providing opportunities to observe features of the park.

Youth explored Elm Creek Park Reserve with cameras in self-selected peer groups, accompanied by one researcher or park staff member to answer questions and address concerns. At the end of the event, youth shared their photos with staff of the Council and Three Rivers Park District. Groups won prizes for accomplishments, such as first-completed and best photo.

The activity incorporated the norms and values of the youth organization (competition), expanded shared knowledge so youth felt more capable in the outdoors (photography), and increased connection by providing time to take pictures together with peers in a supportive environment.

New skills included species identification, explaining natural phenomena, civic engagement for park master planning, hiking, cyanotype printing (creating a negative image of natural objects by placing them in sunlight on specialized paper), hiking on a natural surface trail, balancing on a wooden post, reacting to horses on a trail, and trying unfamiliar foods (bánh mì, enchiladas).

Figure 16. Youth learning to compose photos



As one of the nation's preeminent nature-based park systems, the metro area's regional parks and trails offer more than 20 activities to experience. The activities that were part of the research activities were intended to create confidence in youth to try new skills in the parks.

Finally, staff created a safe, positive environment in which youth could have fun. Youth explored the woods and talked to peers during unstructured time in the schedule. All programming was active, with little time for sitting and listening. (Four of the five in-park visits did not involve time for sitting and listening to adults.) Research staff ensured that program design included games and competitions but also allowed fun to emerge spontaneously.

Some programming reflected specific requests from youth organizations. For example, Organization of Liberians in Minnesota noted that playing music was essential for all forms of recreation, so this was included in the opening ritual. Council researchers prepared an online station to add music to a play list for listening during the day's activities. Troop 100 valued group games and ball sports, so their programmed day included those activities, with extra time added after lunch to enjoy sports at the open field.

The transition for youth from being "strangers" in the park to "belonging" in the park occurred because of the positive interactions created by park agency and Council staff planning, organizational support, and youth initiative. Respect and inviting outdoor programming had several characteristics.

The programming incorporated understanding of the unique aspects of youth development and saw young people as having agency and capable of growth. A sense of belonging for youth resulted from making a space in which youth could "be themselves," express their creativity, voice their opinions in decision-making processes, try new skills, and have fun in the process.⁴

Youth analysis of park staff and programming

The validity conversations with youth researchers confirmed the positive effects of the staff and park programming. Youth evaluated whether the finding that "park staff and programming matters" was true.

Through discussion groups and anonymous comments, the youth affirmed that staffing was very important to enjoying the park. There were no negative comments about the programming being boring, irrelevant, or uninteresting. More detailed results are described in Table 9, next page.

Table 9. Analysis of validity conversations by youth researchers

Query	Agree / Disagree	Comments		
<i>Being out in a park is better if I go with someone who can give me guidance.</i>	50% agreed 50% wanted to visit with just friends	“I agree because it will make me comfortable to come back and also bring someone with me.”	“Agree, I believe having guidance in the park will give people a better piece of mind, of walking through the park.”	Falso. “Puedes caminar y conocer y descansar.” [False. “You can walk, get to know [the park] and rest/relax.”
<i>I enjoy learning about nature and history from parks staff</i>	75% agree 25% disagree	“It was fun and cool.” “Shows different games.” “Yes, I know a lot from Seth.”	“I agree because they have more info and can give you fun facts.” “Sometimes it’ll be fun but over time it’ll become boring and it isn’t as entertaining as it was before.”	“No, not at all, because this one park that I went to had no one to help guide me through the park at all.” “Cierto porque ellos son los expertos.” [Yes, because they are the experts.]
<i>I enjoy learning more about nature while being in the park</i>	75% agree 25% disagree	“It would be very cool to learn more things about nature while be in nature.” “I get to see actually life living there and education.”	“An example would be poison Ivy. If you don’t know what it is and go into it and you don’t know that it’s ivy, you’ll get very itchy”	“Not all the time because sometimes there is no staff to help.”
<i>Park staff teach me new ways to enjoy the park.</i> (Troop 100 only)	100% agree	“Yes, because they can make a game that’s fun.”	“I agree because staff teach you and other people”	“Learning new things would help to know good and bad things.”

Figure 17. Council staff and youth researcher discuss results in validity conversation

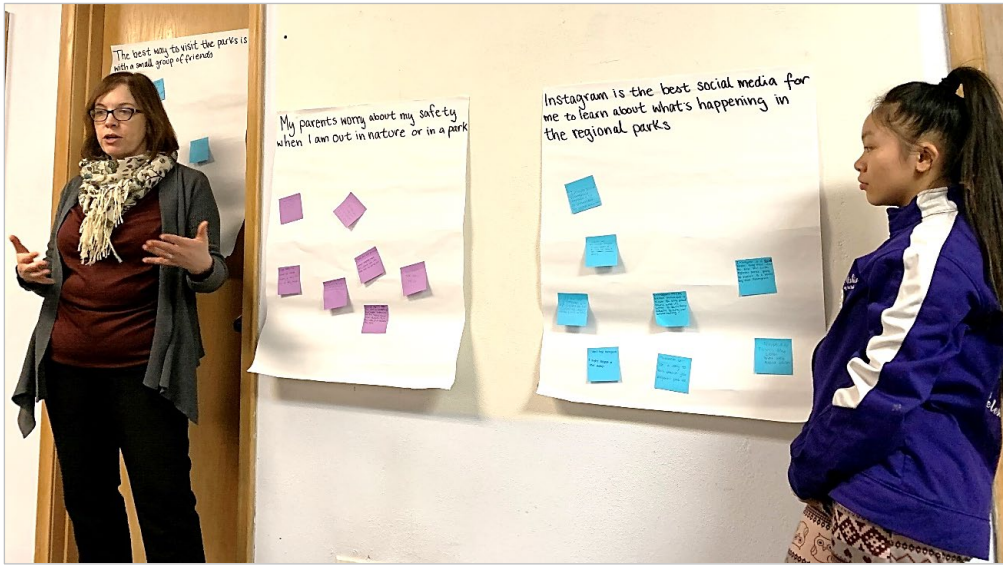


Figure 18. Urban Roots youth researchers analyze results from validity conversation



The impact of staff was the most memorable find

ing for youth researchers. They remembered and highlighted staff contributions and programming more than any other aspect of their park day. Significantly, youth took the ideas introduced by park staff and incorporated them into the context of their own communities and recommended the staff activities in their presentations during validity conversations. For example, Celestial Paladins youth enjoyed racing leaves on the creek's current, an activity that naturalist Ken Pelto introduced. Pelto built a connection with the youth by saying this was an activity he did with his child. He talked about what materials were allowed to be put in the creek. He answered questions honestly, telling the girls that he didn't know what size leaves would be faster but told them it would be fun to find out.

His response encouraged the girls to experiment for themselves. The girls then tried many leaves and reported the results of their experiments back to Pelto and other adults accompanying them that day. Three weeks later, the youth were asked to create a publicity poster for Battle Creek Regional Park and present it to the group of Council researchers and Asian Media Access staff. One team focused on the leaf battle. In the presentation, they describe how Pelto taught them to do leaf races and recommended competition with family and friends to "do battle" with leaves. The invitation, Figure 19, reads:

BATTLE CREEK
Leaf racing at the Creek!
A simple game can be a
COMPETITION! *with FAMILY and FRIENDS*
Get to know others through the BATTLE!

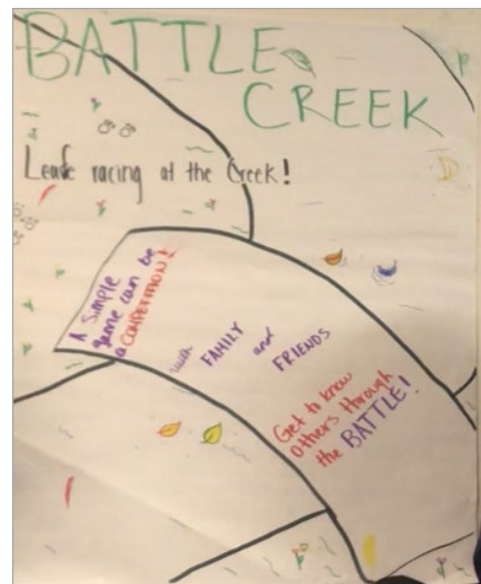
The girls said later that the leaves were multicolored to mimic mango candies. They said that this was "natural resource-based" presentation.

When asked why they thought the invitation was for everyone, they said that everyone is busy with work but they need a break. "Everybody is busy in their life. This could be a fun activity and a fun day for them to take a day off from a busy work life and just have fun, to not stress about work and stuff like that." The youth presentation demonstrated that programming staff can have a lasting impact on connecting youth to the Regional Park System.

When an adult in the group commented, tongue in cheek, that throwing an object in the water was wrong, the girls corrected her, saying, "This is an activity in nature!." In remembering Pelto's instructions about leaves, youth understood what was meant by "nature-based activities," and they enjoyed brainstorming what it would be like to have nature-based activities in their lives. They recognized the connection of the nature-based features of the park to their own communities, themselves, and the enjoyment that being in the park could create.

Investment in high-quality programming connects youth and the outdoors. Through multiple skill sets and intentional creation of a welcoming environment, park staff can accomplish many

Figure 19. Youth-drawn poster inviting competitors to leaf-races



important outcomes. Youth researchers validated the findings that staff expertise leads youth to enjoy the outdoors, and staff can make the experience fun, inclusive, welcoming, and safe.

ENDNOTES

¹ Pp. 7-8 in Roberts, N. S. (2012). Youth Outdoors and Nature: A Review of the Literature. Available at http://online.sfsu.edu/nroberts/documents/research/Youth%20and%20Nature%20LitReview_April2012_Roberts_final.pdf

² For example, several weeks after the event at Elm Creek Nature Center, youth from the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota recalled the programming staff by name, with 90% of youth recalling his name when asked at a meeting several weeks after. Later, one of the youth talked about what he learned by mentioning the staff member without prompting from the research team, stating “Seth taught us about the rule of thirds” in the photography activity in the park. Youth concluded that a positive experience with staff made a difference.

³ Jennings, Louise B.; Parra-Medina, Deborah M.; Hilfinger-Messias; McLoughlin, Deanne K. (2006). Toward a critical social theory of youth empowerment. *Journal of Community Practice*, 14(1–2), 31–55.

⁴ Ibid.