



A Comparison of Contexts:

How the Performing Arts, Sports, and Nature Conservation Foster Positive Youth Development

Ashley A. Boat
Alyssa Scott
Peter C. Scales
Amy K. Syvertsen
Search Institute

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
High-Quality Youth Programming: The Foundation for Positive Youth Development.....	6
Barriers to Accessing High-Quality Youth Programming.....	9
Three Unique Positive Youth Development Contexts.....	11
Learning from Three Exemplars in the Field	16
What We Need to Better Understand About High-Quality Youth Programming So that <i>All</i> Young People Thrive	31
Appendix A. The Developmental Relationships Framework.....	35
References	36

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Executive Summary

High-quality youth programs (including afterschool programs, extracurriculars, and other activities outside of the regular school day) are rich with opportunities to promote positive youth development (PYD). And yet we know that many youth do not have opportunities to participate. There is growing momentum in the policy and practice sectors to redress these disparities to ensure all youth have access to high-quality youth programming where they feel known, seen, and valued and where they can grow and learn.

Building on a deep well of research and practitioner wisdom on the characteristics of positive youth development settings, we examine the unique opportunities that three youth programs are creating for youth of color and youth living in low-income neighborhoods to access the arts, sports, and conservation. Five cross-cutting themes emerged for helping all youth—in full consideration of their diverse identities—thrive:

- 1. Invest in developmental relationships with young people.** High-quality relationships youth have with adults and other youth is the engine of program effectiveness. Developmental relationships don't just happen—for youth to experience them, organizations need to be intentional, equitable, and inclusive in providing training, setting up structures, and supporting adults in building these relationships with all youth.

petent, how often they are invited to do things like contribute opinions or help make decisions about activities or assignments, or how often they perceive that they are provided chances to feel capable.
- 2. Create opportunities for peers to positively connect through a shared goal.** Group experiences with peers are a fundamental part of creating a space where young people feel connected and that they belong. More importantly, working towards a common goal helps youth of different backgrounds learn to work together.
- 3. Embed voluntary and youth-initiated tasks within non-voluntary activities.** It is possible to enhance these spaces by finding ways to give youth a voice and a say. This may start with how often youth have opportunities to feel com-
- 4. Integrate authentic learning opportunities that youth care about.** Because youth often engage in youth programs because it is aligned with their interests, they are often willing to learn new skills that can be easily transferable to other parts of their lives. This can be capitalized on in other settings by digging deep to understand what young people care about and finding ways to make real-world connections with those interests.
- 5. Provide safe opportunities for youth to explore new interests and take risks.** When youth feel physically and emotionally safe they are more apt to explore and try new activities or ideas. This allows young people to identify interests and build new skills.

Our hope is that these programs will continue to be invested in so that they can continue to provide high-quality experiences that promote and extend positive outcomes for *all* youth.



Introduction

High-quality youth programs (including afterschool programs, extracurriculars, and other activities outside of the regular school day) are rich with opportunities to promote positive youth development (PYD). And yet we know that many youth do not have opportunities to participate in these kinds of activities due to systemic barriers like racism and the under-resourcing of schools and afterschool programs in areas of concentrated poverty that have resulted in the exclusion and marginalization of people of color and youth from low-income backgrounds. Moreover, these types of youth programs are often the first items to get cut when school, organizational, and community budgets shrink. There has been amply-documented academic and social-emotional loss that youth and families have suffered due to the pandemic and its related effects of restricting in-person school and in-person co-curricular and out-of-school-time activities, with the learning and mental health toll highest among students of color and those from lower-income backgrounds.¹

Yet, the dollars spent on these types of high-quality youth programs is some of the best investment society can make with a \$4.89 return on every dollar invested in quality youth programs.² Another study, focused specifically on Boys and Girls Clubs, found an even higher benefit-to-cost ratio of 9.6.³ Therefore, there is growing momentum in the policy and practice sectors to redress these disparities to ensure all youth have access to high-quality youth programs where they feel known, seen, and valued and where they can grow and learn.

Building on a deep well of research and practitioner wisdom on the characteristics of positive youth development settings, we examine the unique opportunities that three youth programs focused on the performing arts, sports, and conservation service play in helping all youth—in full consideration of their diverse identities—thrive. Understanding what and how core components of these programs contribute to youth's positive development is important to raise the quality of youth programs overall, broaden access, and integrate these understandings into other youth spaces like schools, ensuring that all youth benefit.

Here we identify three exemplary youth programs: Disney Musicals in Schools (musical theater), Portland Tennis & Education (sports), and the Student Conservation Association (nature conservation).

Five cross-cutting themes emerged, suggesting that these contexts promote PYD by:

- 1. Providing developmental relationships with adults that go beyond caring;**
- 2. Enabling youth to pursue a common goal that fosters positive peer-to-peer connections and relationship-building skills;**
- 3. Providing voluntary, youth-initiated activities that foster autonomy, a greater sense of personal identity, and confidence;**
- 4. Exposing youth to more authentic learning opportunities, resulting in greater motivation and purpose for learning important life skills; and**
- 5. Providing opportunities for youth to identify their sparks, overcome challenges, and develop both performance and moral character.**

These themes are further explored with examples from each of the three programs. Drawing on the specific, malleable, and impactful features of these contexts, we discuss how key program components can be nurtured, implemented, and capitalized on in other contexts, including activities within and outside of school settings, to ensure all young people have the opportunity to grow and thrive.

Our hope is that these programs will continue to be invested in so that they can continue to provide high-quality experiences that promote and extend positive outcomes for *all* youth.



High-Quality Youth Programming: The Foundation for Positive Youth Development

All young people have strengths that can serve as catalysts for promoting future thriving and well-being. This belief is often referred to as positive youth development (PYD).⁴ PYD is an approach to ensure that young people are supported to reach their full potential. The adults in young people's lives, including educators, caregivers, mentors, and youth workers across an array of school-based and afterschool programs, have an important role to play in supporting young people. These adults have the opportunity to promote a number of positive developmental outcomes by empowering youth to build skills and assets that strengthen their academic success, health, social-emotional competencies, and civic engagement as they grow into young adults. These youth programs go by many names, including out-of-school time (OST), enrichment, afterschool, extracurricular, and co-curricular programs. These types of programs are typically supervised by adults and engage youth in developmentally appropriate activities, while also providing a range of skill-building opportunities.

The National Research Council's framework on what youth need from community programs is the single most comprehensive consensus statement about the necessary features of high-quality youth programs.⁵ Two decades later, it still reflects not only the consensus of scholars and practitioners, but the major program quality themes identified by numerous other researchers and practitioners since its publication, especially the emphasis on the centrality of relationships.

Per that report, a high-quality youth program has eight features. It provides a physically and emotionally safe environment; opportunities for young people to belong and build skills; support for feelings of self-efficacy and mattering; positive social norms; a well-run, organized, and dependable program structure; supportive youth-adult relationships; and integration of family, school, and community efforts. The essence of what researchers and practitioners say high-quality youth programs need to do has been distilled down even further to three fundamental components: promote developmental relationships; enable youth to pursue their deep personal interests and “sparks”; and provide opportunities for youth empowerment in decision making and action.⁷ While participating in any youth program may offer benefits, the benefits are much greater when youth participate in *high-quality* youth programs that embody these features.

But most youth do not have access to these *high-quality* programs.

One national study of 15-year-olds, for example, concluded that while 68% of youth said they participated in out-of-school-time (OST) programs, only 35% were in high-quality programs that emphasized the quality indicators of relational opportunities; identifying and pursuing youths’ sparks or deep personal interests; and empowerment, service, and leadership opportunities.⁸ Counting those who said they did not participate in OST programs at all, the conclusion was that just 23% of the nation’s 15-year-olds participate in such high-quality programs. The data show that it is only a distinct minority of youth who are engaged in truly high-quality youth programs.

This gap is important because it is within these high-quality programs that youth often build strong relationships with adults and peers that can help strengthen positive outcomes and promote resilience, as well as increase equity of developmental experiences across demographic groups.

For example, participation in youth programs is consistently found to be related to better so-

What Is Positive Youth Development?

“Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people’s strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing multiple opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build their skills, sense of mastery, and leadership strengths.”

—Interagency Working Group
on Youth Programs⁶

cial-emotional outcomes, self-esteem, psychological adjustment, school adjustment, grades, and test scores, and fewer negative outcomes such as substance use, antisocial behavior, and truancy, as well as longer-term positive effects such as college completion and rates of adult employment.^{9,10,11} The most fortunate youth engage in several different types of high-quality youth programs including activities such as sports, arts, clubs, and/or religious groups. This deeper involvement matters because studies generally find that youth who participate in more than one kind of activity, and do so at greater levels of intensity, enjoy even stronger positive outcomes.^{12,13}

Research has also found that youth are more *engaged* in these types of programs and settings relative to the classroom. Young people who are involved in high-quality youth programs demonstrate higher levels of engagement when measuring intrinsic motivation, effort, concentration, and investment.¹⁴ Moreover, participation in these activities tends to result in greater personal (e.g., identity exploration, emotional learning) and interpersonal development (e.g., collaboration, communication, problem-solving) than do academic classes or socializing with friends.¹⁵ At the same time, studies have shown that OST participation tends to be associated with greater academic success such as high grades, a greater sense of belonging at school, and educational attainment.¹⁶ Thus, while both quality in the academic classroom and opportunities outside of the classroom are essential for young people to thrive, youth programs may be especially well-suited to strengthen many of the assets young people need to reach their long-term goals, and rather than interfering with school success, they seem to promote greater bonding to school and better academic performance.

Furthermore, these types of program experiences have been found to be especially valuable in promoting positive outcomes for youth who experience challenges in traditional school settings due to a host of reasons such as racial or economic/social class marginalization, bullying, and/or having different learning needs.^{17,18,19} For example, in one of our studies of nearly 13,000 6th–12th grade students, significantly more young people said they had developmental relationships and experiences that respected and promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion in OST programs than they did in their schools. Youth who self-identify as Black and Asian American were especially likely to experience those benefits of OST programs.²⁰





Barriers to Accessing High-Quality Youth Programming

One of the most effective ways to invest in youth is by ensuring that all young people have opportunities to participate in these types of high-quality experiences and programs. According to the Afterschool Alliance, for every youth in an afterschool program, there are another three who would participate if a program was available to them.²¹ That's upwards of 25 million children who are unable to access quality afterschool programs; a number that has exponentially grown since 2014. Multiple studies have shown that the participation of youth of color and young people from lower-income communities in high-quality youth programs is markedly lower than that of white and more affluent youth.^{22,23,24}

Afterschool Alliance's America After 3PM survey, which includes a nationally representative sample of roughly 31,055 parents/guardians of school-age children, illustrates some of the barriers that prevent youth from participating in these types of programs.²⁵ This includes program costs, availability, and access to safe transportation to and from programs. These barriers were disproportionately identified by Black and Hispanic/Latinx parents and parents from low-income communities.

These barriers are concerning. Studies have shown that although youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds participate in high-quality youth programs far less often, they tend to benefit even more than their peers from more affluent backgrounds.^{26,27} It is unclear why this discrepancy exists; however, parents from these communities have reported that afterschool programming has helped them stay employed, kept their kids safe, and provided support while job searching during the pandemic.²⁸ These findings underscore the importance of creating opportunities for youth from low-income households to participate in these types of programs.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, now is an especially important time to further understand the barriers that prevent some youth from participating in high-quality youth programming. In many ways, youth programs that occur outside of the school day have been essential for families during this time, as they provided childcare, social-emotional learning support, and academic support when many schools were closed and/or turned to virtual and hybrid learning models. Moreover, these programs may be capable of buffering some of the negative impacts on youth, families, and their communities that have resulted from the pandemic.²⁹

While the need for these programs is increasing, they may also be at risk. Due to the pandemic, many youth programs had to shut their doors, merge with other programs, or reopen with fewer services or more fee-based options.^{30,31} Unfortunately, the economic barriers to participating in youth programs have increased over the pandemic, putting these experiences further out of reach of low-income youth and their families.

Although youth of color have historically had more limited access to high-quality youth programs (even before the pandemic), increasing access alone is unlikely to yield the same outcomes for youth of color. There is a long and well-documented history in the U.S. of young people of color, especially Black youth, being valued for their athletic or entertainment skills, but not valued for the whole of their humanity beyond their sport or artistic talents.^{32,33} Even youth programs that do a good job with the basics of high-quality programming might need to give more explicit attention to critical racialized issues like cultural respect that, if not successfully grappled with, will only continue to limit the interest and retention of youth of color.

Common barriers to youth participation in afterschool programs:

- Cost of program
- Availability
- Safe transportation to and from



Photo: Mimosa Arts

Three Unique Positive Youth Development Contexts

While high-quality youth programs in general facilitate positive developmental trajectories, we focus in this report on how youth programs in the performing arts, youth sports, and nature conservation explicitly promote positive youth development (PYD). Programs in this space create three shared opportunities for youth who participate: opportunities to use their whole bodies to physically work towards a shared goal, opportunities to be vulnerable and stretch beyond their comfort zones, and opportunities to transcend the self in pursuit of a larger purpose.

The performing arts and sports, for example, both enable young people to experience the unique rewards and stresses of doing something they love while others, often large numbers of others, are watching and reacting. They intensify involvement in the present moment and provide a wide range of strong possible emotional responses that can, with the right guidance, help young people learn how to deal with the immediate success or failure of their performance, both as individuals and in groups and teams. One of the biggest outcomes of the performing arts that young people discover is their courage.³⁴ The same can be said for youth sports. Youth sports participation also exacerbates these dynamics even more than the performing arts, with the clear outcome of being a “winner” or a “loser” of a contest, and so requires coaches who can help young people deeply appreciate and believe that winning does not make them a better person nor losing make them a worse person.³⁵

Similar to sports and performing arts, nature conservation requires a group of young people working together towards a goal. Nature conservation experiences can also be a profound influence on young people's sense of purpose, prosocial orientation, and being part of something far bigger than themselves. In fact, in a global study of more than 6,700 youth in eight nations and five major religious traditions, protecting the Earth's natural resources was one of the most common life goals they endorsed.³⁶ But again, those profound influences are more likely to occur, as we found in one of our studies, only if the experience in nature is accompanied by developmental relationships with their leaders, a program that engages them and builds on their motivation to be there, and opportunities to reflect on and make personal and social meaning out of their conservation activities.³⁷

A brief summary of what is already known about each of these unique spaces in relation to PYD is provided below.

Performing Arts

Youth who participate in the performing arts tend to also do better academically and exhibit higher social-emotional competence. One study showed that integrating theater into middle school students' language arts instruction resulted in students being 77% more likely to pass state English tests and 42% more likely to pass state math tests, particularly among students of color and/or students from low-income backgrounds.³⁸

Integrating the arts into content instruction has been linked to a range of critical youth thriving indicators including improved school engagement, increased social skills, higher standardized test scores, and enhanced content retention.^{39,40}

Participation in the arts outside of academic learning also impacts youth development in important ways. For example, youth's experiences in putting together and acting in a dramatic production gives them the chance to develop a wider range of their own emotional

In an interview study of youth involved in dramatic productions, youth named positive outcomes that included a sense of belonging from being part of the group, feeling like part of a community, interpersonal skills such as empathy and communication, improved emotional well-being and confidence, and a better sense of their unique identity.

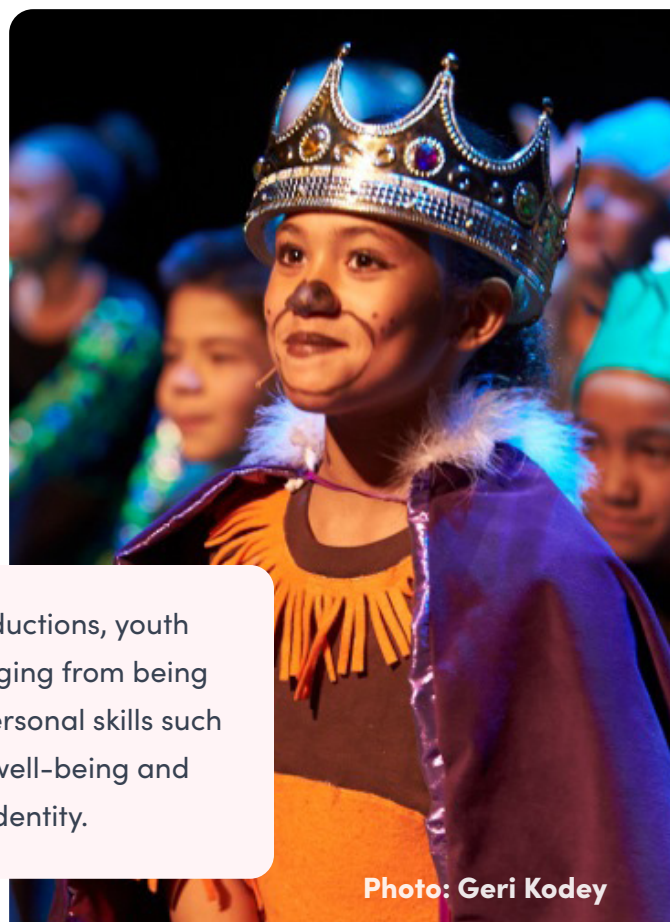


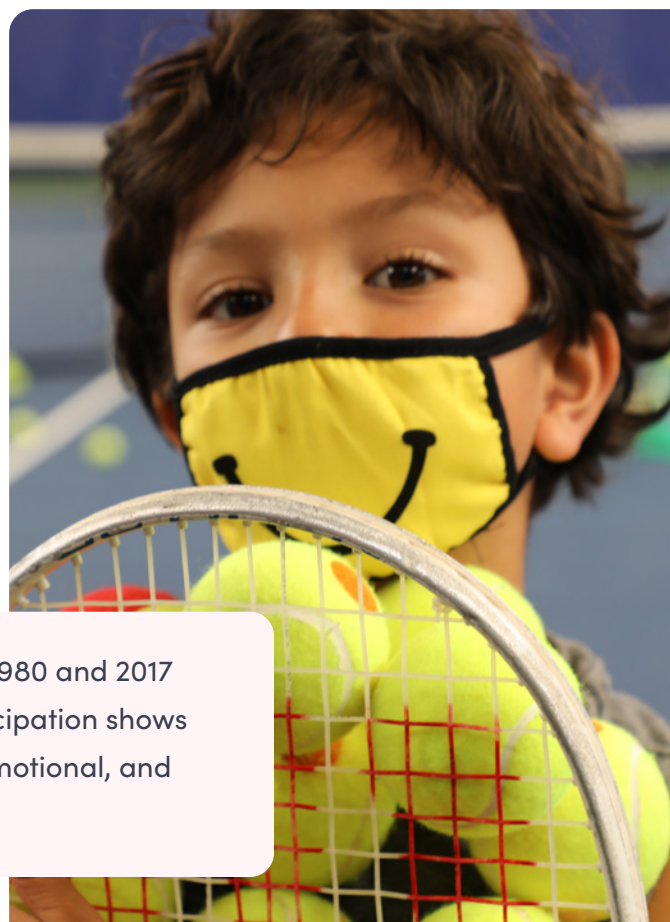
Photo: Geri Kodey

understanding and skills, through strong relationships with both adult leaders and peers in the group.⁴¹ Additionally, they may feel a strong sense of contribution and giving back to their community in the form of their performances. In an interview study of youth involved in dramatic productions, youth named positive outcomes that included a sense of belonging from being part of the group, feeling like part of a community, interpersonal skills such as empathy and communication, improved emotional well-being and confidence, and a better sense of their unique identity.⁴² The processes by which these outcomes were realized was through youth having found a group of people—both adults and peers—with whom the youth felt they belonged, working collaboratively with them toward a common purpose, and being exposed to diverse identities and experiences.

Dramatic performance may have special relevance for youth from diverse cultural backgrounds, because the experience involves engaging in activities that deepen identity both within a specific cultural background and within society as a whole.⁴³ This may include opportunities and challenges such as telling narratives from the perspectives of a character as well as one's own personal experiences, exploring possible selves, opportunities to redefine their traditionally stigmatized identity in a positive and authentic way, and exploring both individual and collective notions of identity. These experiences can particularly help youth from diverse backgrounds maintain or strengthen connection to and pride in their own culture.

Youth Sports

Involvement in youth sports has been demonstrated to have the potential for numerous positive impacts on youth, although the potential for negative effects (e.g., substance use, stress and anxiety) depending on the sport and the quality of coaching youth receive, has also been apparent in some studies.^{44,45} A review of research published on the topic between 1980 and 2017 concluded that the overall impact of youth sports participation shows significant positive academic, psychological, social-emotional, and behavioral effects, especially for girls.⁴⁶ For example, participating in



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sports has been associated with many PYD indicators, including creating positive social connections, enhanced social-emotional skills, identity development, and teamwork.⁴⁷

The quality of coaching youth receive in sports has a direct impact on youth outcomes. Coaches who focus on developing competence and self-esteem create experiences for youth that lead to greater positive development.⁴⁸ In support of that conclusion, positive youth outcomes among urban sports participants, such as learning teamwork and social skills, emotional skills, and initiative-taking, were associated with a coaching climate that was characterized as positive, caring, and mastery-oriented rather than focused on winning.⁴⁹ This suggests that youth may experience positive outcomes when their coaches focus on promoting the developmental assets of youth and not simply competitive success.⁵⁰ Coaches who foster autonomy, encourage athlete input and decision making, focus on problem-solving, and provide personalized feedback are more likely to build positive relationships with their athletes.⁵¹ In addition, when done right, youth sports can be a particularly effective promoter of racial-ethnic equity. For example, one study of nearly 10,000 youth found that young males of color in sports-based youth programs increased their social-emotional skills just as much as young white males did.⁵²

The challenge for youth and families is that only a minority of coaches, estimated at just 10%–36% depending on the study, receive training beyond the fundamentals of their sport in the kinds of coaching skills and player development philosophies that are the hallmark of quality youth programs and most associated with PYD outcomes.^{53,54}

Nature Conservation

Nature contact has been found to promote improved physical, mental, and emotional health for children and adolescents.^{55,56} For example, a study of how nature experiences promote positive development for adolescents in rural South Carolina found that adolescents who reported moderate to high levels of both connection to nature and time spent in nature also reported increased levels of confidence, competence, and connection.⁵⁷

Working in nature alongside others promotes problem-solving, resilience, collaboration, motivation to learn, and a positive view of one's future.



Working in nature alongside others promotes problem-solving, resilience, collaboration, motivation to learn, and a positive view of one's future.^{58,59} Conservation experiences can also help young people achieve intrapersonal and relational outcomes that might include asking for help when needed, communication, persistence, and collaboratively working with others. These have all been demonstrated to support career and college readiness^{60,61,62} and leadership development.⁶³ There is also research demonstrating that adolescents who experience nature and conservation feel increasingly connected to the greater good^{64,65} and are more apt to think of the environment and nature as a shared public space/resource as they get older.⁶⁶

Research has also demonstrated that more time outdoors and in nature can help reduce the health and educational inequalities among youth of color and from low-income households relative to white and more affluent youth.^{67,68} In a study of low-income, urban Black and Hispanic/Latinx youth who participated in a nature-based education program, students who completed surveys before and after the program intervention demonstrated significantly higher health-related quality of life scores in the domains of physical activity, emotional functioning, school functioning, social support, family support, and overall health.⁶⁹

Translating this to programming for youth, research demonstrates the power of hands-on conservation experiences in youth developing a sense of who they are, what they are capable of, and what they hope to do as part of a community and an active participant in an interconnected world.^{70,71}





Learning from Three Exemplars in the Field

To better understand the ways in which these types of youth programs support the growth and development of young people, we take a closer look at three exemplar programs in the contexts of the performing arts, youth sports, and nature conservation.

Over the past decade, we have collaborated with Disney Musicals in Schools (DMIS), Portland Tennis & Education (PT&E), and Student Conservation Association (SCA) on research and evaluation projects to deepen understanding of their program models and impact on youth participants. Through this work, we have engaged hundreds of program leaders, staff, and young people in rich conversations about their experiences. The three programs described here showcase the unique characteristics of these programs, as well as the shared features they have of how they facilitate *developmental relationships* among the participants, help young people ignite their deep personal interests or sparks, empower them and give them voice, contribute to social-emotional learning, and support youth thriving through contribution to something greater than themselves. Moreover, these organizations have invested heavily in breaking down financial, cultural, and access barriers to ensure youth from some of the most under-resourced neighborhood and urban centers have access to high-quality youth programs.

Grounded in previous research and real-world examples, we highlight five cross-cutting themes from these three programs that illustrate how high-quality youth programming can support young people's positive development, with developmental relationships as the necessary catalyst for delivering the other key components of a high-quality PYD experience.

Disney Musicals in Schools

Disney Musicals in Schools (DMIS) is a program designed to bring musical theater to under-resourced public elementary schools. Over 17 weeks, students come together to produce a highly interactive and engaging performance of a Disney KIDS production. Shows like *The Jungle Book*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and others are used to engage students, teachers, families, and the community in the arts. It is free for students to participate, and schools are provided graduated levels of financial and professional development support via a local arts organization and The Walt Disney Company to carry out and sustain musical theater in their schools. To date, DMIS has worked with 529 schools serving more than 60,000 students.

Portland Tennis & Education

Portland Tennis & Education (PT&E) is part of the USTA Foundation's National Junior Tennis & Learning program, which was created by tennis legend and civil rights activist Arthur Ashe. PT&E has a special focus on deeply serving about 75 youth at a time in their year-round and summer programs. Over the last 25 years, PT&E has created opportunities for more than 16,000 underserved Portland youth to thrive through activities such as one-time events, and year-round academics, athletics, life skills, and community support. Most of PT&E's program participants—referred to as “scholar-athletes” to emphasize the academic and athletic elements of the program—come from low-income, Hispanic immigrant households residing in North Portland. It is the goal of PT&E to ensure that every student involved in their program graduates from high school with the opportunity and tools to pursue the post-secondary path of their choosing.

Student Conservation Association

The Student Conservation Association (SCA) seeks to build the next generation of conservation leaders by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land through internships with stipends. SCA is a national leader in preparing high school-age youth and young adults for a lifetime of conservation service, with more than 100,000 alumni across the country. SCA members serve in either year-round programs or summer programs that last two weeks to two months. Youth work in parks, public lands, and urban green spaces to make improvements and learn conservation and sustainability practices. SCA teaches them how to plan, enact, and lead, all while making a tangible impact in conservation.



THEME 1: Provide positive developmental relationships with adults that go beyond caring

High-quality relationships are the critical foundation needed in all youth programs. These relationships are often referred to as the “active ingredient,” or “special sauce” of what makes programs effective. For example, positive relationships with nonfamilial adults, such as teachers, neighbors, coaches, religious leaders, and program staff, are associated with dozens of positive youth outcomes including academic success, healthy behaviors, and social-emotional skills.^{72,73,74,75} While there is an emphasis on developing positive nonfamilial youth-adult relationships in youth program settings, we have found that the relationships youth need to truly thrive and meet their full potential are more accurately described as *developmental relationships* (see Appendix A).

Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people discover who they are, cultivate their abilities to shape their own lives, and engage with and contribute to the world around them. We developed a Developmental Relationships Framework that names five key relational elements that are well reflected in high-quality youth programs. Youth need to experience expressions of care, be challenged to grow, have emotional and instrumental support, be given chances to share power with adults, and expand the possibilities they see for themselves.⁷⁶ Numerous studies have shown the power of such developmental relationships to promote positive academic, social-emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcomes across all demographic groups of youth studied.⁷⁷

Each of the three contexts demonstrates the importance of these developmental relationships, whether with educators, coaches, or program staff (not coincidentally, creating the climate that promotes youth-adult developmental relationships lays the groundwork for strengthening peer relationships, too).

DMIS: Teaching artists from local performing art centers, classroom teachers, and other school support staff who are involved in the DMIS program opt in to be part of the experience. Therefore, these educators in many cases are able to build stronger relationships with students because this program provides an opportunity for students to connect with their teachers outside of the regular classroom. This often allows students to see their teachers in a new light. For many teachers this cultivates a deeper sense of purpose and commitment. Many teachers shared that DMIS reignited their passion for teaching by reminding them that playfulness, creativity, and joy are important elements of learning.

The developmental relationships that form during the productions help students know that someone is supporting and rooting for them to succeed, and more importantly that they matter. As one 10-year-old girl put it: *"They give everyone an individual place to be. They don't take time, like 'Oh, just go find a place,' no. They let every single student... that's a lot of students! ... find an individual place for every scene, and that's a lot of scenes... So, it's really made everyone feel significant and everyone's important, cause they found a place for each and every person."*

These strong youth-adult relationships created a strong sense of community in the program. Feeling like you belong, and are a valued part of something bigger than yourself, can fundamentally shape a child's development.

One student went so far as to describe the cast as, *"A big family [that] cares about each other."*

PT&E: PT&E's after-school and summer programs offer scholar-athletes the opportunity to engage in both academic and athletic activities, providing an additional 900+ annual hours of structured enrichment outside of school time. PT&E staff and volunteers who lead academic enrichment activities in the classroom also support instruction on the tennis court. These staff members and volunteers work closely with youth to provide additional academic support through enrichment activities, partner with their families and teachers to understand each youth's most acute needs, and challenge their growth both academically and on the tennis court. This enables these adults to see, know, and help influence young people in both education and sport settings.

Most of PT&E's student-athletes come from low-income immigrant families and reside primarily in North Portland, which is a collection of transitioning neighborhoods with gentrification, housing insecurity, and immigration as the dominating dynamics. As a result, one of the strong programming themes is adults and youth working together to support the community beyond the tennis program, such as involving the youth and families in community clean-up events in the surrounding neighborhood, or service such as repainting benches on PT&E's property that have been vandalized with graf-

Is It Time for a Relationships Check?

Because strong developmental relationships in youth programs play an essential role in ensuring that all youth have the support and guidance they need to learn, grow, and thrive, it is important to reflect on your own relationships with young people.

Check out Search Institute's [Relationships Check](#) as a starting point. This five-minute online check-up is designed to help you identify where relationships with young people are strong and where they can grow.

fiti. Families and their participating children and youth commit to volunteering for 10 hours of service over the 9-month school year programs, and another 10 in the summer program, with those efforts meant to underscore that all have a collective ownership in and responsibility for the well-being of PT&E and their community. Young people feel empowered to have a voice and help give back to their communities. For many of these young people the relational climate fostered has made PT&E a home away from home. As one student-athlete put it: *“PT&E gives me a place with structure, consistency, and support that I didn’t always feel like I had... I don’t know where I’d be today if it were not for my extended family at PT&E.”*

SCA: Youth in SCA worked closely with Crew or Corps Leaders (depending on the program) throughout their experiences. It is especially important for these adults to create a physically and emotionally safe environment for young people while working in nature. Youth need to feel prepared by their leaders to deal with physical safety issues that might arise and that they can count on their leaders to keep them physically safe. Emotional safety requires a positive relational culture where members of the group know, respect, and trust each other. Crew and Corps Leaders create this culture through specific actions, such as expressing care, sharing their own stories, and promoting collaboration. Crew and Corps Leaders who create a relational culture spend time listening to youth and getting to know them individually. This allows them to understand and attend to everyday needs of the young people in the program. One youth said, *“[Leaders] were really attentive to us. I can tell that, for them, it’s important that we’re okay mentally and physically, cause s/he’s always asking me, ‘How are you? Are you okay? Do you need something?’”* Crew and Corps Leaders felt similarly, as one leader said, *“I think one of the most critical pieces of all of it is getting to know them as individuals, taking that time to show that you care and you respect them and that you know that they’re not like everybody else.”* These exemplary Crew or Corps Leaders foster developmental relationships by laying

Approaches to Building Strong Developmental Relationships

While these three exemplary youth programs show that building strong developmental relationships is essential to promoting positive youth development, it is not always intuitive how to build these high-quality relationships. To help, Search Institute has created a suite of different approaches program staff and adults who work closely with young people can implement into their practice. Find strategies below aligned with each of the five elements of a developmental relationship.

1. [Expressing Care](#)
2. [Challenging Growth](#)
3. [Providing Support](#)
4. [Sharing Power](#)
5. [Expanding Possibilities](#)

the foundation of emotional and physical safety that makes it possible for youth to step out of their comfort zones and try new things.

The developmental relationships fostered through these settings among young people, educators, coaches, and program staff are even more important now. The pandemic and the fallout from virtual learning and social distancing has resulted in increased feelings of isolation and stress among young people, their families, and the educators and staff who support them.⁷⁸ Yet, these developmental relationships are the heart and foundation of what makes these spaces “a home away from home.”



THEME 2: Enable youth to pursue a common goal that fosters positive peer-to-peer connections and relationship-building skills

Whether it is putting on a successful performance, helping your teammates prepare for a tennis competition, or working together to improve our communities and environment, all three contexts encourage young people to work together towards a common goal. This type of context is likely to help youth build stronger relationship skills and peer relationships by fostering positive interdependence and encouraging young people to work cooperatively together. It is through this interdependence that young people learn to share resources and information, provide mutual help and assistance to others, navigate disagreements and challenging situations, and learn to rely on and trust their peers in order to succeed.

Research shows that working towards a common goal is especially valuable across lines of difference, as it is often associated with greater peer inclusion and positive peer relationships among youth who may differ from each other across racial/ethnic identities and/or ability.⁷⁹ These types of peer relationships are also more likely to flourish when adults encourage these cooperative interactions between youth who differ from one another.⁸⁰ This is evident across all three exemplar programs as the adults in these programs encourage youth from multiple backgrounds to work together in order to challenge themselves and pursue successful achievements and contributions.

DMIS: While students in DMIS are assigned individual parts and roles in the musical, they are also all working together to create a successful show. This type of context requires students to build teamwork skills, be vulnerable in front of each other, and be supportive when a fellow castmate makes a mistake. Many of the students described gaining relationship-building skills through their participation in DMIS, such as being able to “work better with others” and becoming more “social.” DMIS creates natural opportunities for students to connect with peers whom they may not normally interact with, such as students from different grade levels. As one student stated, *“It feels happy, meeting all the kids on Tuesday and Thursday, and it’s good to have more friends than only your classmates.”* Teachers also took note of the burgeoning cross-grade friendships that were forming: *“I do remember last year, it was wonderful to see a fourth grader doing something for a third grader, or a third grader who would see a fifth grader out at lunch and they’d play together. I think that built respect... you’re spreading that kindness and you’re not ‘I’m a fifth grader, I don’t talk to you.’”*

PT&E: Although much of PT&Es impact occurs through teaching and developing specific tennis skills that are, necessarily, tailored to individual levels of experience and current competence, their overriding philosophy that unites all staff and youth participants around a common goal is “serving the community, on and off the court.”⁸¹ The organization has served the community in multiple ways, with youth playing significant roles in most, including in the past a program of distributing food to hungry families, and helping pandemic-stressed families pay their bills. More recently, PT&E youth have researched and reported to the community on historical change-makers, typically people of color, such as Cesar Chavez. Youth learn to work as a team and learn deeply about these figures, and why they are important. They then make presentations to the entire PT&E community at open house tennis and class events about what they have learned. PT&E’s structure also fosters peer relationships and a sense of belonging by the scholar-athletes

Supporting Youth Relationship-Building Skills

Try the two activities below to help support relationship-building skills between youth and their peers.

1. **Colorful Conversations** is a 30-minute activity where youth take turns sharing about themselves using colorful props. This activity is designed to support expressing care, and listening, communication, and relationship-building skills.
2. **So Youth Think You Can Listen?** is a 30-minute activity where youth take turns sharing about themselves, and sharing positive words about the person who is sharing. This activity is designed to support expressing care, listening, giving/receiving feedback, social awareness, and relationship-building skills.

being organized into small classes of 12-18 with a lead classroom coach and on-court tennis coach who meet and do many activities together. Formerly, PT&E organized scholar-athletes into even smaller groups, but in the wake of the pandemic and an increase in more ongoing mental health needs of their youth and families, and needing to deal with issues around remote learning, they have had to adjust and be organizationally nimble by trimming some staff and adding a social worker and an instructional specialist.

SCA: The youth in SCA are working towards the common goal of completing conservation projects and the long-term goal of sustained conservation within their communities and across the nation. Opportunities to develop relationship-building skills and strong peer relationships are inherently woven into the design of SCA programs as young people work together to solve problems and conserve the area around them. In the program, young people engage in activities that promote consensus-building, communication skills, teamwork, and working with diverse others. Being involved in one of SCA's programs has been demonstrated to improve participants' interpersonal outcomes, including stronger communication skills, greater teamwork skills, and a greater ability to engage and inspire others.⁸² As one young person shared: *"I think my communication with my peers and superiors is a lot better than it was. I don't think I ever thought about my communication with anyone being good or bad. But after being a leader with my peers it's like, 'Okay, I've gotta step this up.' You have to make things more clear and explain the small and the big pictures."*

Having opportunities that promote relationship-building and positive peer connections is essential for children and adolescents to learn how to successfully work with others, especially with peers across lines of difference (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic background). These three contexts required and encouraged young people to navigate how to build these types of positive relationships with their peers by having them work together towards a common goal. This can be transferred into other youth programs and within the classroom by finding ways for young people to thoughtfully connect with their peers in the pursuit of a shared purpose. Youth experiences of the positive social norms fostered in these programs (such as expectations to be helpful, solve conflicts peacefully) will likely transcend programs by supporting wider social values that help youth integrate and succeed in life outside the program.⁸³



THEME 3: Provide voluntary, youth-initiated activities that foster autonomy, a greater sense of personal identity, and confidence

In most instances, participation in youth programs is voluntary. Youth decide to engage in these types of programs for various reasons, including having a community where they feel welcomed and their voice matters, opportunities to build desired skills, or simply because they love being on a stage, playing tennis, or experiencing nature. Whatever the reason, youth who have the choice to participate in these types of programs and have a say in what activities they engage in within these programs tend to become more active learners and begin to feel more autonomous, develop a greater sense of personal identity, and feel more confident.

DMIS: Students chose to participate and/or were encouraged to participate in the DMIS program by educators who thought they would thrive in musical theater. Students work with teaching artists and educators to find how best to contribute to the overall performance (e.g., acting, singing, dancing, stage crew, helping with set design). Teaching artists and educators are also encouraged to think of additional roles such as dance captains or stage managers so that students have leadership opportunities and have ways to contribute skills to the performance outside of on-stage skills. The program is also designed to allow for students to always have a way for their voice to be heard. For example, students are encouraged to keep a notebook in order to journal throughout the process. Students are encouraged to voice their ideas and reflect on their learnings within their journals. This may include the opportunity to sketch a costume idea, record classmates' choreography, or write down ideas about characters. Because students have a say and a voice in the program, they are often willing to take risks that they may not ordinarily take. For many students it has helped them better understand themselves, including their talents, and has instilled in them a newfound confidence. For example, many students when asked how they had changed throughout the program said they were "more self-confident." Students noted how it felt like they had "broken out" of their shell and how they now "loved being on stage."

PT&E: The central purpose of PT&E is to use tennis as a hook that opens the door to more in-depth opportunities for youth empowerment, inspires and enables educational achievement, and helps youth understand the importance of giving back to their

communities. Many youth come initially to learn and get better at tennis, but they stay because of the full breadth of program offerings that help set the conditions for youth to thrive as whole people, not just tennis players. The program also specifically emphasizes family engagement and active participation, while strengthening children's sense of empowerment, by inviting parents to come play the game their children have introduced them to, and by maintaining an active family council that suggests program and activity ideas and gives input to staff on program plans. Most significant changes in PT&E are run through that family council, which again reinforces the program's commitment to collective ownership and empowerment of all participants.

SCA: Having a nature conservation experience with SCA leads many youth to increase their confidence and belief in themselves. The program effectively does so by giving youth autonomy and authentic opportunities for leadership. For example, the program has standard SCA structures like "leader of the day" and a "chore wheel." In the field, leaders create structured job rotations that ensure everyone has a chance to learn a variety of skills. At the same time, leaders look for leadership and other growth opportunities in daily work and life as a team. This includes opportunities for members to teach and/or mentor each other. Crew leaders remind more experienced members, *"You may not notice, but some of these kids are watching you closely and listening to you closely. . . .you are a role model for [them]."* The program also has morning "circle up," an opportunity for youth to raise questions and share their ideas for effectively accomplishing the day's work. Within SCA, youth are immersed in conservation activities and doing things they might have never considered or thought possible before, and they learn that they in fact can rise to challenges and come out stronger. As one SCA member stated, *"You gain this confidence in yourself that you can accomplish anything that you put your mind to."*

These exemplary programs all found ways to treat youth with respect and give them a voice.

Research shows that this helps young people develop problem-solving and communication skills, develop a sense of efficacy and agency, and become motivated to act on behalf of the greater good.⁸⁴ These types of actions can be transferred even in non-voluntary or youth-initiated activities simply by respecting young people and giving them the opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions. If possible, it may also be valuable to find (even small) ways in which youth have some say or autonomy within non-voluntary activities. For example, students can be presented with increased leadership opportunities within the classroom or with options for academic assignments.



THEME 4: Provide authentic learning opportunities resulting in greater motivation and purpose to learn important life skills

Young people often are the most motivated to learn new skills when engaging in authentic learning experiences. These are “real life” contexts for learning. This type of learning often transcends into lifelong learning skills; it includes collaborative construction of knowledge and provides space for reflection and articulation of ideas.⁸⁵ Youth are more likely to engage in these types of learning experiences when intrinsically motivated to do so. Because the youth in these programs want to succeed and reach their common or shared goal with their peers, they are more motivated to learn the skills needed to reach their goals than they might be in a different context or classroom setting.

DMIS: Through musical theater, students in the DMIS program were often motivated to engage in activities that they may be less comfortable doing in a traditional classroom environment. For example, students had many opportunities to enhance their public speaking, memorization, and reading skills. While these may be skills that students are not motivated to practice within a classroom environment, these skills are necessary in order to put on a successful dramatic production. This authentic learning exercise increases students’ excitement and motivation to practice these essential life skills since they now have a clear and immediate purpose to do so. These newfound skills also empowered students to transfer them into their classrooms. Students shared how they used to feel nervous about raising their hand in class or “really shy” around people they did not know well. The skills and courage they developed through DMIS helped them overcome these feelings and take on new risks. As one student noted: *“I like participating and doing new things, because at first, I was really shy but now, I’m in this program and I’m not being that shy anymore and I’m starting to participate more in class.”*

One of the most important life skills that students acquired was recognizing that mistakes are okay. Students frequently discussed how they felt supported by the emphasis on mistakes as learning opportunities in DMIS. Students reflected on how teaching artists and teachers did this by encouraging them to try again and by emphasizing that it was okay to ask for help. One student said: *“Well, they teach you a lot, so if you make a mistake, they’ll say, ‘Oh, it’s okay, you can do it again.’ They even said that if you mess up when we’re dancing, just don’t stop, just keep on going.”*

PT&E: Youth enjoy playing tennis, but consistently are taught to develop and use all their talents, not just in sports, but also to help their families and the larger community. They see themselves helping to deal with real community challenges, and they see that the social-emotional and life skills they are learning through tennis and educational enrichment at PT&E can have a positive impact beyond their own success, to make contributions to their families' and community's well-being. Youth are a central part of these activities. As PT&E's former Managing Director shared, *"Coordinating with a mural artist who has been commissioned by a local affordable housing organization to paint a large new work on one of their walls. Our youth participate by suggesting content while also learning about the role of public art in community building."*

One method PT&E uses to provide opportunities for youth choice, planning, and reflection about their goals is for youth to participate in interviews with staff about their hopes for their experience at PT&E, across areas of academics, professional development, athletics, social and ecological justice, life skills, and family involvement and culture. One of the seniors at PT&E created several 5-year "road maps" of milestones youth would need to reach in order to attain different post-secondary goals (e.g., trade school, college). Staff then work with youth to ensure they are thinking about and taking needed actions to stay on track, by asking them things like: What type of support do you want from PT&E to do well in school? How can PT&E help prepare you for professional life after high school? How can PT&E expand your athletic ability? What environmental issues do you want to learn about while at PT&E? What is an issue in society that you would like to learn more about? What can be done in the community and your everyday life to help everyone be healthier and happier? What is a non-academic, non-tennis skill you want to learn? How can we get all your family involved at PT&E? PT&E then uses the collective answers to questions like these to make decisions about what programs and supports they offer and why so that their resources stay responsive to current youth needs.

SCA: Throughout the course of a youth member's conservation experience with SCA they engage in many real-world, authentic, and practical learning experiences, such as how to identify plants, build trails, safely use new kinds of tools, cook outdoors, tie knots, administer first aid in the wilderness, and deal with potentially dangerous animals. As one youth shared, *"Before this, I'd only been out for four nights before... it's just really cool to think that we can live for ten days without electricity, without a cell phone, without running water and without toilets."* Through these experiences in nature, youth were also motivated to engage in less tangible skills such as leading others in reaching

a goal, being more open to ideas and recommendations of other team members, and able to carefully evaluate the outcomes of different options when making decisions about a project. Motivation to learn these new skills within the context of nature conservation often contributed to a greater sense of empowerment that can transfer to other domains of youth's lives. Youth talked about the confidence that came with doing things they had never done before. One SCA member explained they used to think they needed help with everything, but now could imagine their experience in SCA translating to other parts of their life: *"I think with seeing that I can do things like this on my own, I'm like, 'Oh, it's not that hard, I can do a lot of other things on my own, too.'"*

It is likely that the skills that young people acquired in these authentic learning environments will transfer to other settings outside of these contexts.⁸⁶ Young people will feel more empowered and confident to use these skills within the classroom, at home, within a place of employment, and in their community. Creating authentic learning experiences can be utilized in many types of settings by simply applying skills to real-world experiences that young people care about.



THEME 5: Performance/action-oriented contexts provide opportunities for youth to identify their sparks, overcome challenges, and develop both performance and moral character

Performing, whether in musical theater or in a sport or as a leader, affords youth the opportunity to discover new talents and interests (i.e., sparks) they did not know they possessed and were more willing to take risks. Engaging in these spaces requires young people to stretch and overcome fears or challenges, which ultimately help youth to think critically, and grow in ways that enhance their self-esteem. Through activities such as solo performances, receiving feedback from adult leaders and peers, and engaging in new tasks, it's easy to see how these spaces provide opportunities for youth to be challenged. Yet, they also provide opportunities for youth to receive praise and positive feedback from adults and peers they have learned to trust, to take risks with and in front of these trusted adults and peers, and to listen to and collaborate with them in the service of something beyond themselves.

DMIS: Many students in the DMIS program described learning new skills and talents that they didn't know they had and/or never had the opportunity to learn prior to being a part of the program. These often included theatrical skills such as dancing, singing, memorizing lines, and channeling a character's emotions on stage. Stepping out onto a stage for the first time is a scary idea for most people. Yet, students repeatedly rose to this challenge; reaching deep to find the courage and self-confidence to overcome their fears. For example, as one 10-year-old girl shared, *"I learned how to do my own dances, because ever since I was little, I was really excited with dancing. But, the problem was, I didn't really know how to dance, because I always made random stuff. But now, since I'm in a musical and they tell me the sorts of dances we do, then, I think I can do it!"*

Many students expressed feeling anxious and afraid at the beginning of the program; unsure if they could talk or sing in front of a large group of people. The program supported them in acknowledging these feelings and using them to fuel their performance. For many students, this generated a deep sense of personal pride. This also translated to students taking risks in other contexts outside of the program, such as in their regular classrooms. Students talked about how they used to feel nervous about raising their hand in class or were shy around other people but that the courage and skills they developed in the program helped them overcome these feelings to take on new challenges. As a teacher working with students on *The Jungle Book* explained: *"I can remember last year our snake was out, the snake head [a role in the production], and two of the third graders walked up and said, 'Can we take her role today? Can we do her line?' And that takes guts, for a third grader to jump in and say, 'I've listened, I wanna try it!' So I think the courage aspect is huge!"*

What Makes You Happy?

What Makes You Happy? Identifying and Sharing Sparks is a 45-minute activity where youth share their deep interests, talents, or activities—their sparks! Use this activity to help youth identify their sparks!

PT&E: Some of the youth who participate in PT&E programming annually have already identified a spark for tennis, but the majority are being introduced to the sport and developing a passion for it because of their experiences at PT&E. Because the sport-specific activities are embedded in a program with a broader emphasis and more varied opportunities for positive youth development and contribution, youth have the chance to strengthen more than their sport skills.

The program explicitly targets four main areas: dealing with the challenges of learning and performing in two important contexts (school and sports), intentional emphasis on

character development through sports, and cultivating relationships with caring, committed adults. One way the program supports character development is by handing out Values Awards each month in the school year, and each week in the summer program. The award recognizes youth who exemplify one of PT&E's core values: Community, Empathy, Collaboration, Equity, Growth + Learning, Safety. Youth select a peer for a Values Award and present it to them, saying why their peer deserves it, at an event for the whole PT&E community.

The program's emphasis on reinforcing the role youth can play in strengthening their own families and making a difference on real issues in their communities serves to highlight for youth that the development of their talents, interests, and values has a larger purpose than just their own success in tennis, school, or career. PT&E helps build youth social capital by leveraging connections and projects with community organizations to provide learning and opportunities in areas such as internships and volunteering, financial fitness, community development, small business, food security, immigrant services, and more. Additionally, workforce development is never far from the minds of PT&E staff or older youth, because, "A lot of our kids later become our employees," according to the former Managing Director.

SCA: Youth who become members in SCA programs develop a new appreciation and love of nature. For example, SCA members have shared that they gain a sense of being connected to nature through their program experience. As one youth put it, *"My favorite experience—maybe in my whole life . . . was one night [when] it was particularly quiet and no one was around. . . I could hear . . . a family of deer, literally right outside my tent, just walking around doing their thing. And I felt part of that."* Therefore, many participants develop a new interest in and concern about conservation. These new interests are often related to specific conservation issues like erosion, invasive species, and water quality. In fact, many SCA alumni become conservation leaders and continue to contribute to the SCA's mission to conserve land.

For many youth members, the experience of a deeper connection with nature really informed their character development and translated to a desire to protect the environment. One youth said, *"I understand and actually care for it more now, like I want to preserve it and help out."* Another youth member talked about how mistakes are framed as a natural part of learning in SCA and said, *"When you try something new, you're always going to make a mistake . . . but you've got to get over it. You will see it, acknowledge, find a solution and keep going."*



What We Need to Better Understand About High-Quality Youth Programs So that *All* Young People Thrive

This report paints a portrait of how youth thrive in high-quality youth programs across three unique program contexts. Helping youth grow and learn is built, with great intention, into the core of these program models. The key to unlocking this growth is to ensure that these spaces value and invest in developmental relationships between youth and program adults—the directors, coaches, teachers, and team leaders within these programs.

It is worth noting again that expertise in the specific content of musical theater, the technical aspects of a sport, or the skills needed to be an effective conservationist is not enough to ensure strong developmental relationships between adults and the youth in their charge. It is critical that those adults know how to foster youth choice and autonomy, feelings of connectedness and mattering, and senses of growing competence by the specific ways they express care, provide support, challenge growth, share power, and expand possibilities. Moreover, these adults must also know how to adjust their ways of relating to youth that is based in and communicates understanding of and respect for the young person's cultural realities and individual identities.

Developmental relationships alone do not have these effects. Relationships are one of the catalysts to strengthening positive youth development (PYD). But there are other keys to effectiveness and impact too, such as in sports, whether personal development and love of the game are prioritized over performance and winning. The developmental relationships only operate to their fullest potential if they are the vehicle for how something else is experienced. Perhaps with the performing arts it is the deep exploration of identity that performing can allow, or in nature conservation programming the profound experience of taking care of something far bigger than oneself. It is these program-unique experiences, coupled with developmental relationships defining the way they are experienced, that we think makes the difference for PYD, not developmental relationships alone.

The three exemplar programs showcased how investing in developmental relationships and attending to additional youth needs and positive developmental experiences can result in high-quality youth programming. Five practices that can be integrated into other youth development settings are provided below. Acting on these five practices can strengthen PYD programs and increase the odds of PYD experiences for youth in other settings like schools, religious congregations, community-based programs, and more traditional problem prevention-oriented programs.

1

Invest in developmental relationships with young people.

All three contexts provided an environment for youth to develop strong relationships with adults and peers. Regardless of whether a youth program focuses on academic enrichment, sports, creative arts, or other activities, it is the quality of the relationships young people have with adults and other youth in the program that is the engine of program effectiveness, and what has been called the active ingredient in how impactful programs can be.⁸⁷ This can transcend beyond these types of programs into the classroom, at home, and within young people's communities. But truly developmental relationships don't just happen—for all youth to experience them, organizations need to be intentional, equitable, and inclusive in providing training, setting up structures, and rewarding practices that support adults in building these types of relationships with all young people.

2

Create opportunities for peers to positively connect through a shared goal.

The three exemplar programs illustrated how young people can build relationship skills and strong connections with their peers when working towards a common goal. Whether as a sports team, a theater troupe, or a conservation crew, those group experiences with peers were a fundamental part of creating a space where young people felt connected and that they belonged. More importantly, working towards a common goal or purpose helps young people

who may differ from each other in important ways learn to work together. This can be embedded into other settings by identifying shared interests and goals that young people have and facilitating positive group work and collaboration efforts.

3

Embed voluntary and youth-initiated tasks within non-voluntary activities.

Part of what makes youth programs effective in promoting positive youth outcomes is that they are often voluntary activities that young people are excited to be a part of. However, there are many important, non-voluntary activities and settings that young people must experience in order to grow and learn new skills. Yet, it is possible to enhance these spaces by finding ways to give youth a voice and a say. This may start with how often youth have opportunities to feel competent, how often they are invited to do things like contribute opinions or help make decisions about activities or assignments, or how often they perceive that they are provided chances to feel capable. For example, research shows that young people are more motivated and invested in homework when they have a choice in what topic they are investigating and/or the format in which they are completing the assignment.^{88,89}

4

Integrate authentic learning opportunities that youth care about.

Youth often engage in youth programs because it is aligned with their interests. Because of this, youth are often willing to learn new skills within this context that can be easily transferable to other parts of their lives. This can be capitalized on in other settings by digging deep to understand what young people care about and are passionate about and finding ways to make real-world connections with those interests. Youth will become more intrinsically motivated to engage in new content or skills if they see how it can be applied to their immediate life and make a difference for themselves and others. Each one of our exemplar programs did something that other programs can emulate: provide youth with opportunities to do something that is interesting to the youth and that brings value to others beyond themselves or helps them to deal with real-world issues.

5

Provide safe opportunities for youth to explore new interests and take risks.

Youth were able to explore their passions, overcome challenges, and develop performance and moral character in each of the three exemplar programs because they felt physically and emotionally safe to explore and try out new activities or ideas. Young people need to feel accepted, welcomed, and valued. Beyond safety, caring, and providing young people with a sense of acceptance and mattering, youth settings are shaped by the chances young people have to identify interests and get better at skills. It might be helping them develop social

skills, academic skills, athletic skills, creative arts skills, entrepreneurial skills, or all these and more. The focus matters only as it aligns with youths' interests, but all youth need help getting better at something that furthers their sense of purpose and belief that they can contribute. The key is for youth settings to find out what this is for each young person and provide safe opportunities for them to take the risks that such development requires.

As previously mentioned, the economic value of these kinds of programs is clear, as study after study shows that the investment we make in high-quality youth programs has a profound impact on the young people they reach. But even more importantly, these high-quality programs can help create a generation with high character, a sense of purpose and opportunity, and the perseverance, work ethic, and social capital support to go after their dreams and contribute to strengthening their communities and country. These three exemplar programs exist in different realms that might attract different groups of young people and focus on different skills, yet they all have similar outcomes that will impact youth far beyond their time in the program. That is the power of high-quality youth programs. We hope this report demonstrates that it is possible to create a high-quality youth program that centers developmental relationships and attends to youth needs no matter the type of program or program context. High-quality youth programs are of incalculable value to all young people, all families, and all communities.



Appendix A

The Developmental Relationships Framework

Elements	Actions	Definitions
1. Express Care Show me that I matter to you.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be dependable • Listen • Believe in me • Be warm • Encourage 	Be someone I can trust. Really pay attention when we are together. Make me feel known and valued. Show me you enjoy being with me. Praise me for my efforts and achievements
2. Challenge Growth Push me to keep getting better.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect my best • Stretch • Hold me accountable • Reflect on failures 	Expect me to live up to my potential. Push me to go further. Insist I take responsibility for my actions. Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.
3. Provide Support Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigate • Empower • Advocate • Set boundaries 	Guide me through hard situations and systems. Build my confidence to take charge of my life. Stand up for me when I need it. Put in place limits that keep me on track.
4. Share Power Treat me with respect and give me a say.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect me • Include me • Collaborate • Let me lead 	Take me seriously and treat me fairly. Involve me in decisions that affect me. Work with me to solve problems and reach goals. Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.
5. Expand Possibilities Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspire • Broaden horizons • Connect 	Inspire me to see possibilities for my future. Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places. Introduce me to people who can help me grow

The Developmental Relationships Framework was developed by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN; 800-888-7828; www.searchinstitute.org.

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Contact us at info@searchinstitute.org



Search Institute

3001 Broadway Street NE #310
Minneapolis, MN 55413

800.888.7828

612.376.8955

info@searchinstitute.org

www.searchinstitute.org

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