



NATIONAL  
RECREATION AND PARK  
ASSOCIATION

# COMMUNITY SERVICE THROUGH YOUTH MENTORING



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## Resource Goals

This resource is designed to help park and recreation professionals and other youth mentoring service providers integrate community service activities into their mentoring programs. This resource:

- Summarizes the importance of engaging youth in community service through youth mentoring programs in parks and recreation.
- Outlines strategies to introduce community service to youth in mentoring programs.
- Identifies common examples to support integration of community service into youth mentoring programs.

## Introduction

At the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), we believe parks and recreation is vital to community health and well-being. Local park and recreation agencies serve as **Community Wellness Hubs** — trusted gathering places that connect every member of the community to essential programs, services and spaces that advance health equity, improve health outcomes and enhance quality of life. In this role, park and recreation agencies provide vital programs and services that address the diverse health and wellness needs of youth where they live, learn, work, play and grow.

Serving millions of young people across the nation each year, park and recreation professionals are leading providers of youth development services — including mentoring, youth sports, afterschool and summer programs, workforce development, environmental education, arts and cultural offerings, and other enrichment activities. As community-based providers of health, recreation and social-emotional development services, park and recreation agencies also are well positioned to guide youth as they grow into active members of a community.

Specifically, youth-adult relationships, especially in recreation, are an excellent way to support youth as they begin to discover their identity, purpose and contributions to society. By interweaving elements of youth mentoring and community service through parks and recreation, we can ensure our youth are equipped with the skills, knowledge and experiences needed to deliver meaningful, positive impacts on a community.



Youth basketball programs are a chance to learn lifelong skills. Photo courtesy of Champaign Park District (Illinois).



## What Is Community Service?

Community service refers to voluntary work performed by a person or group of people for the benefit and betterment of the community. Those who engage in community service do so without intention of receiving a reward or prize, and instead find purpose through their positive impacts on the local, national or global community.

Community service and volunteerism provide benefits across multiple interdependent and interconnected **dimensions of well-being**, helping to establish a sense of purpose, strengthen social and intergenerational connections, combat loneliness, and improve the conditions and environments where people live, learn, work, play and grow.

## Why Engage Youth in Community Service?

The benefits of volunteering are well documented for individuals of all ages, but for young people specifically, engaging in community service can positively impact growth personally, academically and professionally.

Due to the interactive nature of volunteering, young people who engage in community service are provided with limitless opportunities to practice kindness and empathy, build new relationships with members of the community, discover new passions and interests, and serve as key partners in community-level planning and decision-making processes. Young people who volunteer are also more likely to develop essential life skills, including respect for others, leadership abilities, and a deeper understanding of diverse cultures and communities — all skills that prove to be valuable throughout the entirety of one’s life.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, research also shows that regularly volunteering and helping others correlates with reductions in substance use among young people and lower levels of stress, anger and anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

Academically, youth who actively volunteer typically demonstrate stronger educational performance, are more likely to graduate, and become more competitive to college admission offices, scholarship selection committees and hiring managers. Voluntary, hands-on experience also teaches young people to be responsible, hardworking and accountable, while connecting them to established individuals from different professional and educational backgrounds.

Having the opportunity to give back to your community can be an eye-opening experience, but it often is an experience many young people never get to have. As leading providers of youth development services, including mentoring programs, park and recreation professionals are uniquely suited to introduce young people to the value of community service, while teaching them how to be active contributors and collaborators in their communities.

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<sup>1</sup>Nvfs.org. *The Benefits of Teen Volunteerism: Transforming Lives and Communities*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nvfs.org/benefits-of-teen-volunteerism/>

<sup>2</sup>DrugFree.org. *Volunteering and Helping Others Reduces Risk of Substance Use in Rural Adolescents*. Retrieved from: <https://drugfree.org/drug-and-alcohol-news/volunteering-and-helping-others-reduces-risk-of-substance-use-in-rural-adolescents/>

## Community Service Through Mentoring

Youth mentoring programs in parks and recreation provide young people with an opportunity to connect and build supportive relationships with role models in the community. When these trusting relationships also integrate opportunities to engage in community service, participating youth are provided with fun experiences where they can learn something new, help others, and make a meaningful impact on their community. This practice not only introduces mentees to the power of volunteering, but it also helps strengthen the relationship between mentors and mentees. When mentees and mentors come together through acts of service, they develop a deeper understanding of each other's passions, values and life goals, which fosters a greater sense of connection and mentorship.

Elements of community service can be incorporated into youth mentoring programs via many different formats. Volunteer-based activities can be planned between a mentor and mentee, where the pair collaborates to choose an experience that aligns well with the interests of the specific mentee. Mentoring programs can also plan formal group events that bring together all participating mentors, mentees, program staff, and even parents and/or caregivers for a special event or learning opportunity focused on embedding purpose within mentees. Youth-led community service experiences can also create leadership opportunities and support group cohesion and peer relationships. Regardless of the structure, it is important that any experience aligns with the interests of the mentee(s) and is selected and planned in partnership with the mentee(s).



Mentors share smiles and guidance with youth, creating lasting bonds. Photo courtesy of City of Austin (Texas).

## Effective Strategies to Introduce Youth in Mentoring Programs to Community Service

Below are **five strategies** that park and recreation professionals can implement to ensure youth in their mentoring programs are equipped with the skills, knowledge and motivation needed to actively engage in community service.



### STRATEGY #1

#### **Host intentional youth-led activities to amplify youth voice.**

In any youth mentoring program, centering youth voice is essential for fostering a positive, inclusive environment. To cultivate space for youth voice in our programs, we must shift our focus from *talking* to young people to *listening* to young people. By doing so, we are helping to establish a sense of belonging and importance in young people, while providing them with confirmation that their thoughts and opinions are valued and respected.

Consider presenting youth with opportunities to lead that they might not get otherwise. Invite mentees to plan mentoring activities that align with their individual interests, cultures and goals to increase youth participation and confidence. Teaching youth to elevate their voices opens the door for more opportunities to serve as a catalyst for positive change in the future.



### STRATEGY #2

#### **Collaborate with local community-based partners to organize volunteer events.**

Hosting a community service event is a great way to expose youth to the importance of volunteerism. Consider collaborating with a volunteer-friendly organization, such as a library, shelter, food pantry or local church to arrange mentoring events that showcase the different ways young people can give back to their communities. Partnering with local businesses, organizations, municipal institutions or other public service entities offers valuable opportunities to incorporate service and community-based learning activities into your pre-existing youth mentoring programming.

As a bonus, look to these local partners for mentors and guest speakers who can advance your program by teaching mentees the importance and value of giving back to the community.



### STRATEGY #3

#### **Engage youth in decision-making processes.**

When youth are involved as partners in decision-making processes, it increases the likelihood that youth will accept, practice and adopt these decisions into their everyday lives. To encourage meaningful youth engagement, it is essential to view young people as equals in the making of decisions that directly affect them. This means programs, activities and policies involving youth should be developed alongside youth, instead of for youth. Empowering youth to become active collaborators in partnership with adults helps youth practice empathy and reflection and places them on a path to continue responding to community needs in the future.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Youth.gov. *Involving Youth in Positive Youth Development*. Retrieved from <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/involving-youth-positive-youth-development>



## STRATEGY #4

### **Support youth conversation and reflection.**

Provide young people with the time and space to reflect on an activity. Reflection is a powerful tool that can help young people grow from an experience. This strategy allows young people to evaluate what went well and what needs improvement. Engaging in an act of service can be both a rewarding and humbling experience for mentors and mentees as they learn new things about themselves, their peers and the community. After an event, consider providing your mentees with a series of discussion questions to reflect on. As program staff and/or mentors, be sure to participate in reflection and support mentees as they work to process the heavier questions.<sup>4</sup>

A young person's willingness to engage in reflection depends largely on the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship, which is why it is important to create pairings that encourage deep connections, mutual respect and avenues for growth. A successful mentor-mentee relationship will center the mentee's growth and development, foster authenticity and invite vulnerability from both participants.



## STRATEGY #5

### **Encourage activities or conversations that enhance soft skills.**

When planning mentoring events, be sure to prioritize activities that encourage mentees to explore and strengthen their soft skills. 'Soft skills' refer to a "broad set of skills, behaviors and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals."<sup>5</sup> These essential skills can help young people establish a sense of responsibility, increase community involvement and facilitate self-growth.

Examples of skills that support youth participation in a community include:

- 01 **Communication**
- 02 **Accountability**
- 03 **Decision Making**
- 04 **Teamwork**
- 05 **Problem Solving**

<sup>4</sup>YouthCollaboratory.org. *Community Service Resources for Mentors*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youthcollaboratory.org/resource/enhanced-match-support>

<sup>5</sup>YouthPower.org. *Soft Skills for Positive Youth Development*. Retrieved from <https://www.youthpower.org/soft-skills-positive-youth-development>

## Discovering Community Service Opportunities for Youth

For both one-on-one and group-based mentoring, it is essential to prioritize the interests of mentees when selecting and planning volunteer-focused mentoring events. Every community offers a plethora of volunteer opportunities for youth, but discovering the opportunities that will provide the most positive experience for a mentee will require time and effort.

As you work to identify the appropriate community service event, consider the following prompts when making your selection<sup>6</sup>:

- 01 Does the experience relate to the interests and aspirations of the mentee(s)?
- 02 Is the activity age appropriate and suitable for a young person?
- 03 Was the mentee(s) involved in the selection process?
- 04 Will this opportunity expose the mentee(s) to new people, places and activities?
- 05 Will the mentee(s) be given opportunities to interact with other community members?
- 06 Do you have clear expectations to share with participating mentees and mentors?
- 07 Are you providing the mentee(s) with opportunities for reflection?



Youth mentoring programs in parks and recreation provide youth with opportunities to learn new things, help others and make a meaningful impact on their community. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock.

<sup>6</sup>YouthCollaboratory.org. *Enhanced Practice: Community Service*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youthcollaboratory.org/resource/enhanced-match-support>



## Sample Volunteer Activities

As you begin exploring volunteer opportunities for youth that exist in your community, feel free to reference the following examples as you start your search:

- ✓ Volunteer at the local animal shelter — perfect for youth who love to be around animals.

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- ✓ Clean up or help maintain the community, including local parks, trails, riverbeds, roads or other public spaces.

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- ✓ Write and mail cards to military service members, first responders and organizations seeking cards (hospitals, assisted living facilities, etc.).

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- ✓ Collect canned goods or household items to donate to a food pantry.

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- ✓ Conduct beautification activities in parks and public spaces (art projects, small-scale park improvements, planting trees, etc.)

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- ✓ Create and maintain a community garden.

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- ✓ Lend a hand to the older adults in your community, whether that involves shopping for groceries, maintaining the lawn or socializing over a game of chess.

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- ✓ Make care packages to distribute to families in need.

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- ✓ Offer to walk a neighbor's dog.

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- ✓ Host a fundraiser, such as a bake sale, and donate profits to a charity chosen by the mentee(s).

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- ✓ Help at the local hospital.

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- ✓ Assist with youth sports and adaptive sports programs. Empower younger athletes to improve their skills and confidence.

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- ✓ Tutor a younger person in the community.

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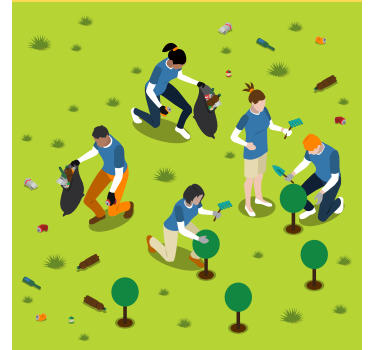
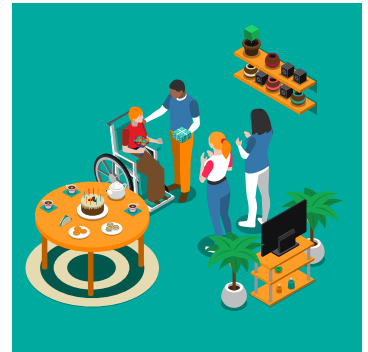
- ✓ Donate clothes, books and toys to a local charity.

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- ✓ Prepare or serve meals at a shelter.

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- ✓ Volunteer at the local library or host a book donation.



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## Peer Strategies

### Examples From the Field: Mount Airy Parks and Recreation, North Carolina

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Mount Airy Parks and Recreation implements the **G.R.A.N.I.T.E. (Grow. Resource. Achieve. Nurture. Inspire. Teach. Empower.) Youth Mentorship Program** with a mission to foster positive relationships between public school students and adult mentors. Participating mentors seek to support families and promote future leaders to be academically and socially successful.

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Through the G.R.A.N.I.T.E. Youth Mentorship Program, Mount Airy Parks and Recreation strives to create an environment that teaches young people the importance of becoming active contributors in their community. By intentionally planning mentoring events that center community service initiatives, Mount Airy Parks and Recreation plays a significant role in guiding youth as they begin to discover their identity, purpose and contributions to society. A powerful example comes from Mount Airy's annual Community Clean-Up Campaign.

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Mentees and caregivers work together to clean up a community park. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock.

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For the past several years, Mount Airy Parks and Recreation has partnered with the Mount Airy Appearance Commission and the Reeves Community Center Foundation to host its annual Community Clean-Up Campaign during the spring. This initiative invites members of the community – individuals, families, businesses or organizations – to claim a street to clean in an effort to keep the community clean, attractive and welcoming to all. Through this “Adopt-a-Street” program, mentees participating in the G.R.A.N.I.T.E. Youth Mentorship Program have the unique opportunity to reserve, maintain and beautify local roads, parks and green spaces throughout the community.

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At one mentoring event in particular, mentees and their parents/caregivers were invited to assist park and recreation staff with the cleanup of Riverside Park in Mount Airy, North Carolina. During this family engagement event, mentees gathered to clean the park and were challenged to collect as many bags of litter as possible. Mentees also engaged in group discussions with mentors and parents/caregivers who highlighted the importance of giving back to one’s community. Mentees left feeling energized and inspired, sharing that the activity provided them with a sense of ownership and pride over their community that they would be unlikely to receive otherwise.

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Following the event, the Planning and Development Department for the County of Surry reimbursed \$7 for each bag of litter that was collected. Excitingly, these funds were then donated to various organizations throughout the community, including the Reeves Community Center Foundation, where donations are used toward scholarships for underrepresented and at-risk youth.

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Volunteers work together to clean up a community park. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock.

## Conclusion

Community service is a powerful strategy that can be used to expose youth in mentoring programs to new people, places, perspectives and experiences, and allow them to see the direct impact their hard work, time and efforts have on a community. By incorporating elements of community service into meaningful mentoring relationships, park and recreation agencies everywhere can encourage youth to unlock their intrinsic motivations for volunteering, leading to increased confidence, purpose and a genuine desire to help others among youth. When elements of youth mentoring and community service are intertwined, the impact can be life changing for the community and for the youth themselves.



Parks and recreation is vital to community health and well-being. Photo courtesy of The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

## Additional Resources

***The Mentor's Guide to Youth Purpose:*** This resource provides guidance and practical tools for how mentors can nurture and support a young person's sense of purpose. The guide includes worksheets that mentors can use to reflect on their own sense of purpose and how that can influence the mentoring relationship, including through communication strategies, adultism and by giving space for youth voice.

**Youth Service America:** This webpage offers program ideas, guides, tip sheets and additional resources to support youth engaging or wanting to engage in community service.



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### Contributing Authors

- Cathy Cloukey, CPRP, Assistant Director, Mount Airy Parks and Recreation
- Allison Colman, Senior Director of Programs, NRPA

### Research Compilation

- Karen Carter, Senior Manager of Information Services, NRPA

### Review and Design

- Charissa Hipp, Marketing and Engagement Manager, NRPA
- Ivy McCormick, Graphic Design Manager, NRPA
- Vitisia Paynich, Director of Print and Online Content, NRPA
- Meagan Yee, Online Content Manager, NRPA

## About the National Recreation and Park Association

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant, and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this mission by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being. For more information, visit [www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org). For digital access to NRPA's flagship publication, *Parks & Recreation*, visit [parksandrecreation.org](http://parksandrecreation.org).

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