

Amplifying Youth Voice in Parks and Recreation



Empowering youth to provide their voice, input and ownership in programs can unlock a host of benefits to park and recreation-based youth development programs. Whether it is an out-of-school time program, summer camp, arts class or youth sports league, park and recreation professionals can integrate youth voice into programming using various strategies.



Youth and adults work together to cut the ribbon at an event in Denver, Colorado. Photo courtesy of City of Denver Department of Parks and Recreation.

Benefits of Youth Voice



Builds trust with adult coaches, mentors and recreation leaders



Promotes belonging and ownership in programming



Builds valuable life skills for youth including advocacy, leadership and critical thinking



And, most importantly, gives youth a voice in shaping their overall experience

Build Skills to Promote Youth Voice: An Important First Step

Building life skills is a natural part of recreation programming. By being intentional about developing skills that support and prepare youth to exercise their voice and agency, we can empower youth to actively participate and lead within programs. Here are **four example skills** that are easy to promote using everyday activities to help young people find their voice:

01

Communication

skills are a must for youth to exercise their voice. Build skills by offering opportunities for public speaking, group discussions or talent shows.

02

Teamwork and collaboration

skills build a sense of community and comfort level for youth to share their voice. Build skills through sports, teambuilding exercises and group projects.

03

Self Confidence

helps youth believe in their abilities, that their voice matters and that they can make a difference. Build confidence in your programs through recognition, goal setting programs, leadership opportunities and/or highlighting artwork.

04

Self Awareness

connects youth to their interests, values, strengths and needs. Developing self-awareness helps the young person fight for what is important to them. Build by providing opportunities to debrief activities, journaling and providing youth with new experiences to help connect them to their passion.

Strategies to Embed Youth Voice in Programs

Effective approaches specific to parks and recreation include providing choice, seeking input, involving youth in programmatic decisions and establishing a youth leadership council. The strategies listed here are not an all-inclusive list, however they provide a starting point for agencies that can be easily replicated throughout a variety of recreational settings.



Provide Choice

Offering choices to youth in programming empowers youth and provides youth with sense of ownership and responsibility in the program.

- Allow times for youth to choose between a variety of activities.
- Use “This or That” exercises to give youth a say in program choices. For example, let them choose between different activities, weekly themes or event ideas.
- Give youth opportunities to customize their experience. Try offering a goal setting workshop for your program and help youth create a personal development plan to achieve those goals.

Seek Input and Feedback

Gathering input and feedback from youth is crucial for developing engaging programs that align with their needs and expectations. This can be done formally and informally.

- Informal input and feedback can be obtained through casual conversations, observations and activity debriefs.
- Gather formal input and feedback using surveys, focus groups or suggestion boxes.

Include Youth in Decisions

Including youth in various aspects of program development and implementation is crucial for creating programs that truly meet their needs and expectations.

- Start by involving youth in establishing rules, behavior expectations or group norms.
- Encourage youth to tap into their creativity by inviting them to brainstorm or develop new ideas for activities, projects or program improvements.
- Engage youth in budget decisions. Offer them an opportunity to allocate funds for future program activities, art projects or trips.

Start a Youth Council or Advisory Board

Youth Leadership Councils and Advisory Boards provide a structured platform for youth to actively participate in decision-making processes and take on leadership roles.

- Identify enthusiastic youth committed to join council or advisory board.
- When starting your group, work with youth to define purpose, goals, roles and routines.
- Encourage youth to brainstorm and identify opportunities and projects they are passionate about and make them happen!



Keys for Success

- Create a feedback-friendly environment where youth voice is consistently requested and used.
- When youth provide feedback, build trust by making sure youth know their feedback is valued and acted upon. Communicate changes to the program based on the feedback given; if you cannot act upon certain pieces of feedback, be sure to share that as well.
- Don't forget the families! Engaging families in the process supports youth development and reinforces the importance of youth voice at home.

This resource is supported by Grant #15PJDP-22-GG-03844-MENT awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.