



Beyond Recreation

A Broader View of Urban Parks

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Urban Parks as Partners in Youth Development

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Urban parks have long played a vital role in community-based programs for young people. Traditionally, they have been thought of mainly as venues for play. Open spaces, playgrounds, sports fields, and recreational programs make an important contribution to children's lives. But to realize their full potential as community resources for youth development, parks can and should go beyond recreation. At their best, they can offer a wide variety of high-quality opportunities for children to build the skills and strengths they need to lead full and rewarding lives.

Recent research provides important lessons about how community-based programs can be structured to promote youth development most effectively. And the experiences of a new generation of youth programs in urban parks—including several funded by The Wallace Foundation's Urban Parks Initiative—illustrate how these lessons can be applied on the ground.

Reaching Healthy and Productive Adulthood Requires a Range of Assets

Too often, we think of youth development programs as designed to solve problems, such as drug use or delinquency, or to target young people "at risk" of these and other problems because they come from vulnerable families or difficult neighborhoods. Continuing efforts to prevent problem behaviors and help at-risk youth are clearly needed. But merely mitigating acute problems is not enough to produce well-functioning adolescents and adults in today's world.

The latest thinking about youth development—contained in a landmark report by the National Academy Press—makes a powerful case that children and adolescents are best served by a constellation of community-based activities that help them build essential skills, knowledge, and aptitudes.¹ This new direction in public policy "places children and adolescents once again at the center of neighborhood and community life, where they can engage with caring adults inside and outside their families, develop a sense of security and personal identity, and learn rules of behavior, expectations, values, morals, and skills needed to move into healthy and productive adulthood."²

The assets children and youth need for healthy development fall into four major domains: physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social (see box 1 for examples of assets in each domain). Individuals do not necessarily need the entire range of assets to thrive. But the odds of success are better if one has assets in all four domains. And community-based programs that are fun can help kids acquire assets in any of the four domains. For example, a wrestling program is not only fun but also can help kids lose weight and get fit (domain 1). A debate league is not only fun but also can help kids develop critical thinking and reasoning skills (domain 2). A chess competition is not only fun but also can help kids build a motivation for positive achievement through mastering a difficult game (domain 3). Designing and planting a community garden are not only fun but also can stimulate in kids a commitment to civic engagement (domain 4).

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Personal and Social Assets That Facilitate Positive Youth Development

Domain 1: Physical development

- Good health habits
- Good health risk management skills

Domain 2: Intellectual development

- Knowledge of essential life skills
- Knowledge of essential vocational skills
- School success
- Rational habits of mind—critical thinking and reasoning skills
- In-depth knowledge of more than one culture
- Good decisionmaking skills
- Knowledge of skills needed to navigate through multiple cultural contexts

Domain 3: Psychological and emotional development

- Good mental health including positive self-regard
- Good emotional self-regulation skills
- Good coping skills
- Good conflict resolution skills
- Mastery motivation and positive achievement motivation
- Confidence in one's personal efficacy
- "Planfulness"—planning for the future and future life events
- Sense of personal autonomy/responsibility for self
- Optimism coupled with realism
- Coherent and positive personal and social identity
- Prosocial and culturally sensitive values
- Spirituality or a sense of a "larger" purpose in life
- Strong moral character
- A commitment to good use of time

Domain 4: Social development

- Connectedness—perceived good relationships and trust with parents, peers, and other adults
- Sense of social place/integration—being connected and valued by larger social networks
- Attachment to conventional institutions (school, church, nonschool youth programs)
- Ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts
- Commitment to civic engagement

From the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, DC: The National Academy Press, 2002), pages 6–7.

Programs designed to reach children with special needs or prevent risky behavior can certainly be useful. But to maximize effectiveness, their overall focus should be more inclusive—promoting healthy development for children generally. All children, for example, need health risk management skills, not only those who live in drug-infested neighborhoods. All children need conflict resolution skills, not only those who number gang members among their peers.

How Parks Can Help Youth Acquire Assets for Development

Urban parks have always been vital in providing youth with recreational opportunities and enriching program initiatives. But a few are breaking new ground, with innovative programs for children and adolescents that are in keeping with recent advances in policy thinking. Three examples from beneficiaries of The Wallace Foundation's

Urban Parks Initiative illustrate these new directions.

Building Self-Esteem and Health Knowledge: Central Park's North Meadow Recreation Center

Central Park's North Meadow recreation center coordinates with local schools and community groups to teach basic anatomy and wellness principles along with interactive fitness activities. All programs are designed to enhance student health/science programs as they relate to requirements for New York City and New York State curriculum frameworks.

The exterior of the Center has been preserved to protect its landmark status. But the interior has been remodeled to include a cushioned exercise floor, high ceilings, and a community room with computer stations. These computers are part of the Center's focus on fitness and general health, in addition to sports. Animated CD-ROM programs teach children basic anatomy and wellness principles, with a talking skeleton chattering its way through each lesson.

The staff uses a variety of approaches to encourage self-esteem among the students who take the Center's courses. One instructor may teach basketball refereeing skills and another may teach wall climbing on one of two climbing walls (one inside, the other outside). Students learn how teamwork can solve problems that no one can solve alone; and how fitness, nutrition, and exercise can contribute to richer, fuller lives.

One way the center entices youth into its programs is through its invitational basketball tournaments. The Center hosts competitions for teams (of girls as well as boys) in several age groups between 9 and 18 years. Youth may initially be attracted to the recreation center for a basketball tournament. But once there, they discover the broader opportunities to build their skills, self-confidence, and knowledge of what it means to be fit and healthy. In other words, the Central Park programs help young people gain critical assets not only in the physical development domain (good health habits and health risk management skills), but also in the psychological and emotional development domain (positive self-regard, mastery motivation, and a sense of personal autonomy).

Building Creativity and a Sense of Efficacy: Garfield Park's "Empowering Youth" Initiative

The Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance is devoted to making Chicago's Garfield Park, particularly renowned for the flower exhibits in its Conservatory, a place where members of the surrounding community can enjoy and benefit from the park more generally. One of its most innovative community-oriented programs is its Empowering Youth initiative.

The core of this initiative is a Student Advisory Board. Each year, a new group of 15 fourth-through seventh-graders designs a permanent display for the Elizabeth Morse Genius Children's Garden. The students work as real designers, exercising their brainpower and creativity in a team environment as they develop models, determine a budget, and collectively decide on the year's winning design. This program not only provides intellectual content but also helps young people understand that they can plan and work together, master challenges, and make a lasting contribution to their community, all key assets in the domain of psychological and emotional development.

This program exploits the park's best asset—the public gardens of its Conservatory—to teach community children life skills. Other parks could use their natural assets in similar ways. A park with a good nature trail, for example, could develop a program in which kids collect their own nature specimens and plan and implement an exhibit displaying their findings. Or a park well-endowed with trees could establish a bird watching post. Equipped with camcorders, a youth program could help kids track the birds they see and the sounds they make—researching the birds they identify and compiling a video for display at a community happening. Such programs offer young people an activity they enjoy while they also use their research skills to learn about nature and their planning and creative skills to show off what they have learned.

Building Leadership Skills: Prospect Park's Youth Council

The Prospect Park Alliance is devoted to restoring and preserving Brooklyn's Prospect Park and making the park overall a safe and

pleasant place for New Yorkers of all ages to enjoy. The Youth Council was launched when the Alliance realized that people under 21 were not represented, despite making up a large part of the park's usership.

The Youth Council is a standing volunteer group, whose composition changes annually as members graduate. Each year current Council members contact youth groups throughout Brooklyn, making presentations and inviting new recruits for the Council. The Council's goals are to create opportunities for teenagers to learn leadership skills, become stewards of the park, and plan events and activities for other teens. Council members plan and participate in teen events, leadership training, park assessments and surveys, routine park maintenance, and visits to local politicians and community groups. In addition, the Council renovated the Youth Resource Center (with assistance from Home Depot, the home improvement company), creating a space exclusively for youth programming.

Each incoming group, ages 14 through 20, goes through a training program with four components: leadership/teamwork, understanding the park, civic responsibility, and safety/judgment. During the understanding-the-park training sessions, for example, they divide into groups and do a visioning exercise—pretending they were the original park designers and creating mission statements of who would use the park and why. For civic responsibility, youth discuss their values and what defines them. Programs like this teach young people the value and rewards of service to their community, along with leadership, moderation, and self-reliance.

Quality Counts in Youth Development Programming

To make a real difference, quality matters in park-based youth programs. Programs that mean well may nonetheless fail to engage and strengthen young people if they are not effectively designed and administered. Recent experiences among innovative programs launched by urban parks suggest several key lessons to consider.

First, the most effective programs do not try to be all things to all young people. No single program can or should try to serve all the children and adolescents in the community. Young people naturally have different inclinations and need different activities to build specific sets of strengths. And even among children with the same interests, how best to serve those interests changes with their age. Parks should design their youth initiatives around the unique assets and opportunities their particular facilities offer. As discussed earlier, Central Park took advantage of its newly refurbished North Meadow recreation center to teach health and wellness skills. And Garfield Park capitalized on its renowned Conservatory to offer young people experience in exhibit design. Similarly, the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG) took advantage of some leftover herbs from the harvest at its Youth Farm—a large garden adjacent to a subsidized housing development—to teach young people how to can and preserve fruits and vegetables, and potentially generate some income for the program.

Second, high-quality youth programs are aimed at specific age groups to maximize their effectiveness. As we know from our own families, children's interests, attention spans, and capabilities change as they grow. A program that works well for 10- and 11-year-olds will bore most 16-year-olds. And a program that can hold the attention of older teens is likely to frustrate and discourage younger teens.

Parks are increasingly recognizing this important principle. SLUG, for example, now has two separate programs for teens. The Youth Garden Intern program is for ages 11–14. In three sessions—spring, summer, and fall—young teens are taught such skills as bee-keeping, rose maintenance, and low-flow watering systems. As they become proficient, they are promoted to help supervise or teach in the classes. The Urban Herbsals program is for ages 18–24. These participants, in addition to preparing jams and infused vinegars, are responsible for selling their products. This involves traveling around the city and making presentations at farmers' markets, enterprise fairs, and so on—"learning how to look strangers in the eye and

speak authoritatively,” as the Urban Herbals manager puts it.³

Portland, Oregon Parks and Recreation recognizes the principle of age-specific programming in its Summer Nature Camp initiative. Forest Magic, for example, is for children age 5–6. It helps young children learn about the forest, its inhabitants, and its hidden secrets through legends, songs, nature games, and hikes. Eco Explorer is for youth age 9–12. It takes participants to investigate the ecology of forest, field, and stream with microscopes, soil/water testing kits, and computer mapping.

There is more than one way to design age-targeted initiatives. For some parks managers, it may make sense to develop an array of related programs, each targeted at progressively older groups. Others may decide to start more modestly, focusing exclusively on a single age group, and only expanding their programs as they gain experience.

Garfield Park’s array of programs provides an excellent example of age-graded offerings. Pre-kindergarten through second-grade children, for example, have Butterflies, Bees, and Beetles. Participants learn about color and light using kaleidoscope kits and plant material to build their own naturescopes. They also explore the world of photosynthesis and learn how a leaf uses light. For grades four through eight, there is Survival on a Tropical Isle, in which participants imagine their airplane crashes in the Amazon Forest. They learn map skills, find clues to help them survive in a tropical environment, and discuss how people have adapted to life in tropical regions. For grades nine through eleven there is the High School Docent program. Docents go through core training that provides team building, leadership development, and education in botany, public speaking, and career planning. Then they volunteer throughout the year to help staff the Conservatory Alliance’s special programs.

Finally, the most successful programs for youth recognize and value what young people themselves can offer. Those who think of young people merely as having problems, needing services, or requiring instruction are overlooking an important resource. Young

people can be energetic, enthusiastic, generous, and full of new ideas and perspectives. But first we have to overcome stereotypes about young people to benefit from what they have to offer.

Prospect Park’s experience, again, is instructive. Its Youth Council has two explicit goals: 1) enhancing the lives of young people, but also 2) improving programming for children in the community. In order to do both well, park authorities realized they should listen to youth. As one Youth Program director put it: “Some people don’t understand how to work with youth. You have to give them more meaning than just telling them to stuff envelopes. They want to be respected more than anything. They want to be asked, not told.”

In response to the input of the Park’s Youth Council, and with their planning help, Prospect Park has programmed a series of “Events for Teens.” This includes a Teen Summit with the Brooklyn Public Library and a teen-themed after-party for a park “Greenathon” fundraiser walk. The youth gain a sense of confidence and the park gets a set of events that are powerful attractions. Youth Council members also conduct a community assessment and evaluation through sample surveys. They find “places where kids hang out and make presentations on what they find.”⁴ This helps youngsters learn that they can make their community better by working collectively, at the same time that it helps parks keep control of their spaces. Perhaps most striking, Youth Council members travel to the New York State Congress each year to help make the case for parks. Their testimony helps young people gain a sense of mastery at the same time that it helps parks get much-needed public support.

San Francisco’s Neighborhood Parks Council (NPC) has also benefited from really listening to youth. The germ of the idea came when the NPC found that teens were misusing a park facility and began to ask why. In answering this question, they investigated teen programming in their district and found there was almost none, particularly for older teens. So they went straight to the youth and asked them what they wanted to see happen in the facility they had been misusing. This simple solicitation led to the idea and implementation

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of Park Sessions, a youth-organized, youth-created young artist programming initiative open to all youth living throughout San Francisco.

The first Park Sessions event featured a Visual Art Area where local youth showed their work, which was curated by their peers, as well as open mike performances by youth bands, poets, and dance performers. Volunteer chaperones and youth coordinators managed security, as well as the coat and bag check. Throughout the planning process youth engaged in successful problem solving. They decided to deal with graffiti, for example, by taping butcher paper to a wall outside. “At the end of the evening the paper was in bags and the building was clean.”⁵ The community benefited from a popular and well-attended event. The youth planners benefited by coming to understand the real-world problems involved in planning events attended by older teens. All benefited from providing a forum for young artists.

Teen Neighborhood Leaders (TNL) is the solution that Slavic Village, a Cleveland neighborhood, came up with to address problems of vandalism and harassment surrounding the Village’s middle and high schools. The Slavic Village Development Corporation decided to invite students to a community meeting, where young people readily acknowledged that their peers might be causing problems. These students said they would like to have a major role in improving the situation and decided to form a group for the purpose. As a first step, TNL drew up a list of what was important to them.

They agreed to make improving Barkwill Park, a park frequented by teens and considered one of the worst in the city, a top priority. The teen group teamed up with the parks department, their local councilman, the Slavic Village Development Corporation, and the Barkwill Park Committee to create a “dreamscape” for this mostly concrete space. In addition to designing and planning this project, TNL raised funds of their own to help pay for new playground equipment, organized community park-cleanup days and, notably, convinced the parks department to restore the basketball hoops that had been

removed to discourage the “wrong” people from using the park.

TNL has since evolved into six groups of teens working on different issues. Notably, one group is working in conjunction with national youth coalitions to amend the Higher Education Act of 1965. The amendment would establish a scholarship program to encourage and support students who have contributed substantial public services. Thus far, TNL participants have attended national meetings and met with congressional staff to encourage representatives to pass the amendment.

Conclusion

Community leaders concerned about local youth development can look to urban parks for more than playgrounds and recreation. High-quality parks programs can be effective in building the assets young people need for healthy development:

- **Physical development.** Youth programs that provide opportunities to run, play, master athletic skills, and participate in team sports are essential. Parks can and should play a central role in developing and delivering these kinds of programs for youth.
- **Intellectual development.** Nature trails/ecology, historical assets, and performance spaces for music and theater can all be used to help young people hone their knowledge of essential life skills, acquire critical thinking and reasoning skills, and improve their school performance.
- **Psychological and emotional development.** Many different kinds of park programs can build psychological and emotional assets at the same time they challenge young people physically or intellectually. Working in teams to design and implement youth-centered programming can instill coping and conflict resolution skills. Helping with the long-term planning of a major annual event can build a commitment to good use of time.
- **Social development.** Programs that challenge young people to work in groups, address the needs of others, and contribute to the well-being of their community

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all help build social development skills. Participating in volunteer activities such as park clean-up days, for example, can help foster a commitment to civic engagement.

Communities need all the help they can get in providing a wide range of high-quality opportunities for young people to help them become the nation's next generation of skilled, competent, and responsible adults. Urban parks can serve as important resources in these efforts.

Notes

1. As described in National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, DC: The National Academy Press, 2002).
2. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, page 3.
3. See <http://www.pps.org/tcb/slug.htm>.
4. See http://www.pps.org/tcb/prospect_park.htm.
5. See http://www.pps.org/tcb/park_sessions.htm.

About the Author

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The Wallace Foundation's Urban Parks Initiative

The Wallace Foundation's **Urban Parks Initiative** was designed to improve the quantity and quality of urban parks for public use, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, and to broaden urban leaders' understanding of the importance of parks to the health and vitality of cities.

From 1990 through the initiative's conclusion in 2003, Wallace supported 19 public/private partnerships in 17 cities for creating new parks in underserved neighborhoods, reforesting urban areas, restoring landscape, and bringing new activities to both neighborhood and metropolitan parks. Wallace's initiative helped secure 350 acres of new parkland and 50 miles of greenway trails, restored 300 acres of existing parkland, and leveraged more than \$150 million in public/private commitments. The Foundation also supported national and regional forums to share lessons on park development and their contribution to community revitalization.

The Wallace Foundation commissioned the Urban Institute to evaluate the effectiveness of funded activities in parks in 11 cities. The Institute collected information on how parks improvement efforts may have induced changes in the numbers or types of people who used the parks. Researchers also examined the partnerships parks agencies formed with nonprofit organizations to undertake these improvements, as well as the ways in which they engaged citizens in their efforts.

Parks Publications

This brief is one of three short studies focused on a new and broader view of the roles parks can play in urban communities: "The Public Value of Urban Parks" and "Understanding Park Usership," by Chris Walker; and "Urban Parks as Partners in Youth Development," by Margery Austin Turner.

Other publications stemming from the Urban Institute's evaluation of the Wallace Urban Parks Initiative include *Partnerships for Parks: Lessons from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Urban Parks Program*, by Chris Walker; *Public Use of Urban Parks: A Methods Manual for Park Managers and Community Leaders*, by William Kornblum, Chris Hayes, and Ryan Allen; and *Communities for Parks: A Framework for Building Engagement*, by Chris Walker, Maria-Rosario Jackson, and Robin Redford.

All these publications can be obtained from the Urban Institute's online bookstore, <http://www.uipress.org>, or by calling 202-261-5687.

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The Wallace Foundation

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- Strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement
- Improve after-school learning opportunities
- Expand participation in arts and culture

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