

# MENTORING IN PARKS AND RECREATION

STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS



NATIONAL  
RECREATION AND PARK  
ASSOCIATION

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Resource Goals</li></ul>	3
II.	What Is Family Engagement?	5
III.	Why Is Family Engagement Important in Youth Mentoring?	6
IV.	Key Factors to Consider When Engaging Families	7
V.	Effective Strategies to Engage Families in Youth Mentoring Programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sample Strategies</li><li>• Navigating Barriers</li></ul>	8
VI.	Peer Strategies	11
VII.	Conclusion	13
VIII.	Additional Family Engagement Resources to Explore	13
IX.	Acknowledgements	14

Cover Image:  
Youth compete in a relay race at Olympics Camp at Brackett Park in Minneapolis.  
Photo courtesy of Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board.

# INTRODUCTION



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

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 and play.

Park and recreation agencies are a leading provider of youth development services — including mentoring, youth sports, afterschool and summer programs, workforce development, environmental education, and other enrichment activities. Park and recreation professionals serve millions of youth across the nation each year. According to the *2021 Out-of-School Time Survey Report*,<sup>1</sup> more than four in five park and recreation agencies offer out-of-school time (OST) programs for youth — and include programming beyond traditional physical activity and recreational opportunities. Many agencies deliver programming to support young people’s social-emotional and life skills development, so they can better manage the challenges that come with growing up and support youth in the following areas:

- 37 percent of agencies offer mentoring programs
- 18 percent of agencies plan to offer mentoring within the next two years
- 35 percent of agencies have social-emotional learning curriculums
- 57 percent of agencies implement mindfulness activities (i.e., yoga, meditation, arts) into programs

<sup>1</sup> National Recreation and Park Association. (2021). *2021 Out-of-School Time Report*. Retrieved from [nrpa.org/OSTReport](https://nrpa.org/OSTReport)

Leveraging local park and recreation assets, NRPA developed the *Youth Mentoring Framework*<sup>4</sup> to aid park and recreation agencies in developing their own individualized mentoring programs. The Youth Mentoring Framework is grounded in the *Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework*.<sup>5</sup> It outlines 40 research-based, positive experiences and factors that influence youth development and lead to positive life outcomes. The more assets individuals have, the less likely they are to engage in risky behaviors.

NRPA recognizes the impact **adverse child experiences (ACEs)**<sup>2</sup> can have on youth and their communities. ACEs can negatively impact academic performance, physical and mental health and well-being, while placing stress on relationships with peers and family members. ACEs may also contribute to lifelong challenges such as dependence on substances, chronic health issues (toxic/prolonged stress, depression, heart disease, etc.), and social and financial consequences.<sup>3</sup>

To mitigate these challenges and support youth, park and recreation agencies provide positive experiences and environments through various programming and services. Mentoring programs in particular build protective factors around at-risk youth, while forming strong social connections and positive relationships to address trauma, adversity and other challenges that youth experience.

A key part of impactful youth mentoring programs is integrating family engagement activities. Family engagement activities refers to the intentional inclusion of families in programs that contribute to the development, learning, and well-being of the youth. Family engagement provides positive benefits by connecting parents/caregivers with their child's activities. When families are exposed to a program that has a foundation in fostering youth development, they have the opportunity to witness and mimic positive

behaviors as well as implement strategies to help support their child in healthy ways.<sup>6</sup> Family engagement activities also provide a pathway for developing shared interests and building essential relationship and social-emotional skills including positive communication, self-awareness, problem solving and more.

As one of the most important, centralized figures in a child's life, parents/caregivers are a crucial source of support and engagement for a young person's growth and development.

## RESOURCE GOALS

This resource is designed to help park and recreation professionals and other youth mentoring service providers integrate family engagement components into youth mentoring programs. This resource:

1. Summarizes the importance of family/caregiver relationships for youth and stakeholders involved in mentoring programs
2. Outlines key considerations that park and recreation professionals should keep in mind as they develop family engagement activities
3. Explores family engagement strategies that can be integrated into mentoring programs through parks and recreation
4. Identifies common challenges of family engagement and the ways to overcome them

<sup>2</sup> CDC. "Adverse Childhood Experiences." Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> CDC. "Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences." Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html>

<sup>4</sup> NRPA. *Youth Mentoring Framework*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/mentoring-in-parks-and-rec/nrpa-youth-mentoring-framework/>

<sup>5</sup> Search Institute. *The Developmental Assets® Framework*. Retrieved from <https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/>

<sup>6</sup> Rymanowicz, Kylie and Schulz, Jodi. (2021, February 3). "Family engagement in mentoring programs." Michigan State University Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/family-engagement-in-mentoring-programs>

# WHAT IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

Local park and recreation agencies and other social service organizations such as government agencies, community-based organizations, and schools understand the importance of strong relationships between families/caregivers and youth. Families/caregivers exert maximum impact on a young person's mental and physical health as well as their social and emotional well-being. This is especially true during the early years as youth develop into adults. For many organizations, there is a strong desire to engage families and cultivate and strengthen positive relationships, especially within youth mentoring programs where relationships are key. Family engagement involves support and positive engagement of parents, caregivers and/or families on an ongoing basis. Family engagement can happen in a variety of ways and will look different in every community.



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

# WHY IS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT IN YOUTH MENTORING?

Families play a critical role in shaping the environments and experiences of youth, which influence their behavior, actions and choices. Families, especially parents and caregivers, are recognized as experts in determining what is best for themselves and their children.<sup>7</sup> Given the strong influence that families have on a child's life, family engagement is an important part of helping youth mentoring programs meet their goals of improving youth behavioral and health and well-being outcomes.

Most mentoring practitioners and program staff agree that family engagement strategies are at the top of their list in terms of urgency. Results from The National Mentoring Partnership's (MENTOR) [2016 National Mentoring Program Survey](#) show that parent and family engagement is the third largest area of need reported by programs.<sup>8</sup>

Family engagement aligns with [Parental Acceptance Theory](#),<sup>9</sup> which implies that parental support of the mentoring relationship can impact the mentee's "receptivity" to the mentor and thus facilitate positive mentee outcomes. Further, [Social Network Theory](#)<sup>10</sup> suggests that engagement of families/caregivers may help to foster a useful "team" approach to supporting the mentoring relationship.

Other benefits of family engagement specific to youth mentoring include:

- Youth benefit when families are involved in their child's activities. School-based research on the positive impacts of family engagement for youth indicated a positive impact on academic achievement, improved peer and adult relationships, and engaging in fewer health risk behaviors, such as substance misuse, smoking and drinking alcohol.<sup>11</sup> Family engagement helps meet students' needs more effectively, whether academic, behavioral or social-emotional.
- Family engagement is a conduit for supporting and providing resources to families, so they can contribute to the positive development of their children.
- Regular engagement keeps families up to date and builds trust between program providers and caregivers.
- Failure to engage families/caregivers can impact a positive mentoring relationship and the mentees' experience in the program. A parent/caregiver that is disengaged from the mentoring program can limit what their child gains from the relationship.

<sup>7</sup> Children's Bureau and Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021, July). *Family Engagement: Partnering With Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3QQBiAy>

<sup>8</sup> Mentor. National Survey. Retrieved from <https://www.mentoring.org/resource/national-survey>

<sup>9</sup> Mendo- Lázaro, S., León-del-Barco, B., Polo-del-Río, M., Yuste-Tosina, R., and López-Ramos, V. "The Role of Parental Acceptance — Rejection in Emotional Instability During Adolescence." (2019). *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6480184/>

<sup>10</sup> Blakeslee, J. and Keller, T. (2013). "Social Networks and Mentoring." *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*. DuBois, D. and Karcher, M. SAGE Publications.

<sup>11</sup> youth.gov. Impact of Family Engagement. Retrieved from <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/impact-family-engagement>

# KEY FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN ENGAGING FAMILIES

A thoughtful, inclusive and consistent approach is essential to developing a successful family engagement strategy for a youth mentoring program. Before developing their specific strategies and activities and engaging with families/caregivers, park and recreation professionals should review recommendations and ensure that their family engagement approach aligns with the following guidelines:

- **Ensure that activities are equitable, inclusive and welcoming:** Offer events that meet family needs and/or speak to their interests or culture.
- **Ensure consistent outreach:** Regularly invite families to participate in program development, support, outreach and recruitment.
- **Introduce a personal approach:** Reach out to individuals, start a conversation, and learn informally about their families, experiences and culture.
- **Consider the convenience factor:** Be flexible and don't have strict participation requirements, ensure accessibility to spaces where programs are held, consider the timing of your events, and incentivize participation by offering transportation and healthy meals or snacks.
- **Stress the importance of mutual trust and respect:** Listen and respond to family feedback or concerns in a timely manner.
- **Utilize multiple forms of communication for outreach:** Use calls, texts, email, fliers and social media posts.



A summer camp counselor teaches a young girl. Photo courtesy of Kettering (Ohio) Parks, Recreation and Cultural Art Department.

It also is important to consider that every community is different, whether rural, suburban or urban — each has its own unique mix of history, culture, resources and challenges. When considering family engagement activities and opportunities, consider the unique assets and needs of your neighborhood. A [community asset map](#)<sup>12</sup> can help identify these areas when planning out your mentoring program. It provides an assessment of your community by highlighting existing agencies, organizations, and people that may contribute to your program.

<sup>12</sup> Alabama Youth Justice Alliance (AYJA) and Southern Poverty Law Center(SPLC). *Unlocking Your Community's Hidden Strengths: A Guidebook to Community Asset-Mapping*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3TalyK6>

# EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE FAMILIES IN YOUTH MENTORING PROGRAMS

While the benefits of family engagement are well-known, it can be challenging to understand how to put this guidance into practice. Below are several sample family engagement strategies that park and recreation agencies can implement to maximize engagement of families, parents and caregivers.

## SAMPLE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- **Customize materials:** Create a parent/caregiver handbook on program guidelines. Be ready to share a handbook, (hard copy or online version) with parents. This will assist parents to familiarize themselves with the program and provide guidance around expectations for youth, families and park staff.
- **Host educational sessions:** Host orientation sessions for parents/caregivers and youth to discuss program goals and expectations. Orientations can occur after kick-off events or during youth application/intake to a program. This is a great way to establish a one-on-one relationship, develop trust and review program goals. Discussion and input from families should be encouraged.
- **Survey parents/caregivers:** Consider disseminating a parent/caregiver survey to gather additional information on what parents/caregivers are looking to get out of the mentoring program and family engagement components.



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

The National Mentoring Partnership (MENTOR) offers [guidance](#)<sup>13</sup> on how to best support mentoring relationships with families. They provide the following enhancement suggestions for youth mentoring programs:

- Program conducts a minimum of one in-person monitoring and support meeting per year with the mentor, mentee, and when relevant, parent or guardian.
- Program hosts one or more group activities for matches and mentees' families.
- At least once during each school or calendar year of the mentoring relationship, program lead thanks the family or a responsible adult in each mentee's life (e.g., guardian or teacher) and recognizes their contributions in supporting the mentee's engagement in mentoring.

<sup>13</sup> Garringer, M., Kupersmidt, J., Rhodes, J., Stelter, R. and Tai, T. (2015). *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring, 4th Edition*. Mentor. Retrieved from [https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Final\\_Elements\\_Publication\\_Fourth.pdf](https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Final_Elements_Publication_Fourth.pdf)





Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

- **Collaborate with partners on family engagement efforts:** Team up with community partners and organizations, including schools, libraries, nonprofits, churches, social clubs, etc. To reach underserved populations, consider partnering with groups that speak to and serve culturally diverse and relevant communities. By joining forces with other community organizations, you will be able to reach more parents/caregivers and to expose parents/caregivers to additional resources in the community.
- **Conduct open houses and family events:** Any engagement event that includes families provides an opportunity to form relationships and trust — while supporting youth well-being. For mentoring programs, this is a great way to connect parents, mentors and youth.
- **Communicate consistently:** Provide regular updates and have open communication with family members. This can be informal and occur when youth are picked-up/dropped off or can take place in the form of a more formal call or email. This regular practice provides an opportunity to address any issues or concerns, celebrate successes or provide feedback.
- **Celebrate accomplishments:** Showcase youth achievement and invite families to participate. Host a family fun day or celebratory event with various activities while promoting mentee successes. Consider displaying creative work (photography, writing, visual arts forms, music/performance), creating a presentation of youth takeaways or learnings from the program. This also can include an ethnic/cultural theme to recognize and celebrate diverse youth and their families.
- **Align family engagement efforts with evidence-based practices:** Explore ways in which these activities and events are in alignment with [NRPA's Youth Mentoring Framework](#).<sup>4</sup> Combine themes such as positive **role models** with having a professional/guest speaker, **community service** with a park or community clean-up event, and **positive peer impact** where youth are partnered together to speak about their experiences with parks and recreation or the mentoring program.

## NAVIGATING BARRIERS

Engaging parents/caregivers and families can be challenging. Lack of time, busy schedules, transportation issues, childcare challenges, and other barriers can influence engagement and participation in activities. Below are some of the common challenges park and recreation professionals face when engaging families and ways you can overcome these challenges.

- **Communication and clear expectations:**

When engaging families, get the word out broadly via multiple communication channels. This can include social media, radio/television, fliers, emails and mailings. It's also important for families to understand the scope of program that's offered and expectations for all parties involved, which can be outlined in printed guidelines and reviewed during intake meetings.

- **Language and cultural differences:**

Ensure that you know and respect the diversity of your community, including what language community members would like to receive materials in. Consider offering written material in other languages. To build trust with community members, it is also important to have diverse program staff and/or volunteers that reflect the cultures, races and ethnicities, and backgrounds in your community.

- **Mistrust or fear:** As an extension of municipal government, some community members may not trust your program's intent to engage with their family based on past experiences. Encourage an open dialogue between agency staff and the community; clarify any questions or concerns on provided services. This also is part of having clear communication and will help minimize fear or perceived consequences.

- **Availability and accessibility:** Programs may occur during caregiver/family working hours. Consider surveying parents/caregivers to determine what times and days work best for programs, or consider offering multiple times and opportunities for family programs during afterschool or evening hours and on



A young girl stands at communication board in Laura's Place playground in Maryland. Photo courtesy of Howard County (Maryland) Recreation and Parks.

weekends. Offer your activities and events at various, accessible locations in the community. Consider providing transportation if locations are further away and/or not easily accessible.

- **Motivation:** To increase interest in your events/programs, seek feedback and learn directly from the community (via surveys, public/community meetings or one-on-one discussions) about their interests and desires for family engagement activities. Seek participation in these activities from a broad range of community members.
- **Childcare needs:** There may be siblings or other youth at home that require supervision. Offer space for all household members, either to participate in the family event or to have an area designated for childcare.

# PEER STRATEGIES

Elizabethton Parks and Recreation in Tennessee and Mount Airy Parks and Recreation in North Carolina are two communities that have participated in NRPA's Park and Recreation Mentorship for Rural Youth Impacted by Opioids in Central Appalachia program. Both agencies have had experience and success providing family engagement opportunities within their youth mentoring programs. Below, each agency shares some of the family engagement strategies that best served their communities and offers tips and guidance on how to provide family engagement in your own community.

## MOUNT AIRY PARKS AND RECREATION FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Mount Airy Parks and Recreation provides family engagement activities twice a month. The activities they design are grounded in park and recreation and local community resources while considering the unique needs of the community, including challenges related to food insecurity and transportation. Based on lessons learned and successes they've experienced, Mount Airy Parks and Recreation ensures that their family engagement offerings are focused on:

- Incorporating pieces of NRPA's *Youth Mentoring Framework* into each family engagement activity to continue supporting youth development and lift up developmental assets
- Providing a meal or snack at each event to help offset food insecurities that community members experience
- Providing transportation to any offsite family engagement event to increase access for all
- Engaging community partners to help support these activities (funding, space, services, etc.)

In terms of programming, Mount Airy offers both in-person and virtual family engagement activities to provide a variety of offerings and meet the needs of their diverse community. Events are usually offered outdoors and leverage the spaces and resources of their park and recreation agency. A physical activity is typically combined with a fun family engagement event to promote overall health and well-being, while others have focused on career exploration and education. Activities have included:

- Swimming, bowling, skating, kickball, dodgeball
- Family game nights
- Park clean up event
- Visiting a local farm

Virtual family engagement activities are utilized to supplement in-person offerings or when meeting in-person is not realistic. Any supplies needed for these virtual sessions are delivered to each participant's home prior to the session being held. Examples of virtual offerings have included:

- Bead making
- Face mask decorating
- Valentine's Day craft
- Game night
- Fort night (participants made various structures using blankets, mats and pillows)
- Black History Month and Women's History Month celebrations

## ELIZABETHTON AND CARTER COUNTY'S FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Elizabethton Parks and Recreation partnered with [Carter County Drug Prevention Coalition \(CCDPC\)](#)<sup>14</sup> to implement a mentoring program for youth impacted by the opioid epidemic and other ACEs in 2018. Together, these partners have successfully implemented family engagement activities over the last four years. Based on lessons learned, the partners recommend that other mentoring programs working to integrate family engagement strive to:

- **Invest in families:** Ensure families know they are an important part of the youth mentoring program early and often.
- **Be creative with marketing:** When marketing the program, make sure there are local “celebrities” or well-known community members featured to make parents feel like every kid in the community can benefit from a mentor.
- **Share progress with parents and caregivers:** Keep a list of mentee achievements and activities (e.g., climbed a rock wall, got a library card, received a good grade, read a book, played a sport to season completion, etc.).
- **Say thank you:** When you acknowledge and thank your mentors, also thank the parents/caregivers for allowing their child to participate. A simple card or email can go a long way.
- **Engage partners:** Look to various partners to support program activities. Partners that have supported Elizabethton and CCDPC's events have included:
  - Local agricultural educators
  - Arts and cultural alliance volunteers
  - Local health department professionals
  - Banks and credit unions
- **Provide ample opportunities for engagement:** Partners had success with a variety of family engagement activities including:
  - Quarterly family engagement events including Nerf Wars, Parents vs. Children Dodgeball, Trivia Nights, Community Field Days, Potter and Painting Classes
  - Family Nutrition Activities including cooking and meal preparation classes and a family-friendly tailgate at the local football game
  - Substance misuse education and prevention including “[Celebrating Families](#)”<sup>15</sup> which offered a family-centered approach to a drug education and prevention program
  - Other classes and educational events including disaster preparedness classes, basic first aid and Narcan training, resume workshops, job skill building classes and financial planning workshops

<sup>14</sup> Carter County Drug Prevention Coalition. Retrieved from <https://cartercountydrugprevention.org>

<sup>15</sup> National Association for Children of Addiction. Retrieved from <https://celebratingfamilies.net>

# CONCLUSION

Park and recreation professionals continue to play an important role in advancing community health and well-being with the ability to connect all members of the community to essential programs, services and spaces — especially mentoring. Family engagement is essential for successful mentoring programs and positive relationships. Involvement of families provides numerous benefits to all participants, including improved academic performance, development of positive peer and adult relationships, reduction in risky behaviors, improved positive youth development and related health outcomes, and increased social-emotional support.

## ADDITIONAL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

- “Resources to Engage Families Through Wellness and Nature”  
(<https://www.nrpa.org/blog/resources-to-engage-families-through-wellness-and-nature/>)
- Commit to Health Foods of the Month Family Engagement Workbook  
(<https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/9857e0b07c6243aea8be636bbd275fd1/foods-family-engagement-workbook.pdf>)
- Family Health & Fitness Day  
([nrpa.org/FamilyFitnessDay](http://nrpa.org/FamilyFitnessDay))
- Headstart Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center  
Family engagement | ECLKC ([hhs.gov](http://hhs.gov))
- Foundational Elements of Family Engagement  
Children’s Bureau — Family Engagement: Partnering with Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes  
([https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f\\_fam\\_engagement.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_fam_engagement.pdf))



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

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Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

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## 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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