

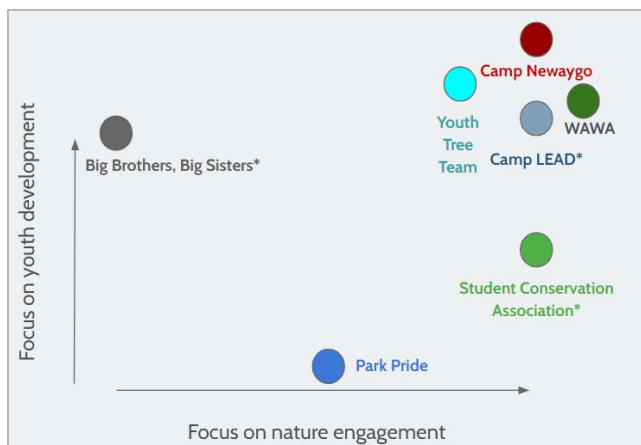
# Integrating Youth Development and Nature: An Exploration

## Executive Summary

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This focused literature review explored studies of programs at the intersection of intentional youth development and nature. As a tool, the purpose of this literature review is meant for programs that have a focus on nature and/or youth development to explore “what works” to support young people’s growth on a number of youth development and nature-based outcomes and to consider learning that might be useful to enhance programs and practice.

### Where nature and youth development come together



\*Denotes examples provided by Search Institute

Youth development and nature-based programming are both broad fields employing a wide range of approaches to achieve outcomes. When elements from nature-based programming and youth development programming are integrated thoughtfully, impactful experiences happen for participants.

The continuum above illustrates the multiple intersections of youth development and nature where programs may find themselves. Some programs may focus more intentionally on youth development approaches and outcomes, some on nature-based approaches and outcomes, and others on both equally. There is no “right” or “wrong” place to be; rather, programs may use this continuum to evaluate current practice and explore how they may want to enhance their nature-based and/or youth development practices.



### What’s happening at the intersection of nature and youth development that works?

- **Integrating unique opportunities provided by nature:** When thoughtfully integrated, nature provides a unique setting for growth.
- **Consistent time for individual and group reflection:** Nature is a venue for experiential learning and key to that experience is built in time for guided self or group reflection.
- **Providing space that affirms young people's identities, perspectives, and leadership:** Thoughtful programs create culturally responsive spaces that invite youth to lead and grow. Youth have voice and choice and their thoughts, identities, experiences, and perspectives are respected, celebrated, and taken seriously by adults and peers.
- **Inclusively and intentionally building relationships:** Positive relationships between youth and adults and among peers support growth and learning.

“When youth are being introduced to something new, if they trust you, it’s easier for them to take those steps out of their comfort zone...the relationship enables youth to take that halfway step that can lead to a deeper connection with nature.” - Children & Nature Network Leader

"I feel more connected to Earth, so I just feel that makes me feel a lot happier and a lot more calm. And that also makes me feel more passionate about the work that we're doing individually and as a group." - *Conservation program youth participant*

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### What outcomes do youth experience from participating in programs that focus intentionally on youth development *and* nature?

- **Personal development:** Youth gain a deeper understanding of themselves, developing an environmental ethos and appreciation for nature, and having greater self-confidence and self-esteem.
- **Agency:** Youth display greater self-efficacy, resilience, and a conservation and environmental justice orientation.
- **Leadership:** Young people develop social skills, decision-making skills, and adaptability.
- **Connection to place and community:** Youth build stronger relationships (youth-adult, peer-to-peer, and group cohesion) and a sense of belonging and place.

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"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." -*Conservation program youth participant*

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### Looking ahead

Future research should seek to include more diverse programs and participants. Several articles note that nature-based programming (e.g., wilderness education, urban farming, etc.) coupled with authentic caring and relationship-building appears to be particularly beneficial to youth in under-resourced or historically marginalized groups. However, the majority of research on nature-based programming for youth has not intentionally focused on these populations and they are under-represented in research samples.

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"You can be a naturalist in urban spaces. It doesn't have to look like backpacking. It can look like sitting on a porch... It doesn't have to look like some of the more privileged ways people imagine." -*Nature Leaders Cohort Member*

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### Methods

Our exploration of youth development and nature drew from research and the lived experience of practitioners. The following sources were included:

- Select individual research articles and comprehensive reviews
  - Reports from Search Institute projects focusing on youth development and nature
  - Input from the Atlanta and Grand Rapids Natural Leaders Cohort members
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