



NATIONAL  
RECREATION AND PARK  
ASSOCIATION

# CENTERING EQUITY TO SUPPORT POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



# Table of Contents



<b>1</b>	Resource Goals	<hr/>
<b>1</b>	Introduction	<hr/>
<b>2</b>	Language Matters	<hr/>
<b>3</b>	Equity in Practice for Mentoring Programs	<hr/>
<b>3</b>	Competency 1 - Self-Awareness	<hr/>
<b>4</b>	Competency 2 - Direct Communication	<hr/>
<b>5</b>	Competency 3 - Relationships Across Difference	<hr/>
<b>5</b>	Competency 4 - Race Equity Analysis	<hr/>
<b>6</b>	Case Study	<hr/>
<b>8</b>	Conclusion	<hr/>
<b>9</b>	Acknowledgements	<hr/>

## Resource Goals

This resource is designed to help park and recreation professionals and other youth-focused service providers incorporate everyday practices for building equity and inclusivity into youth mentoring and youth development programs. This resource aims to do the following:

- o Outline practical suggestions for applying NRPA's Equity in Practice core competencies to mentoring and youth programs
- o Identify examples from the field of how mentoring programs are implementing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) principles to support youth and mentors in their communities

## Introduction

Park and recreation agencies are one of the largest providers of youth development services nationwide with three out of four agencies offering out-of-school time (OST) programs, such as mentoring, youth sports, after-school and summer programs, environmental education and more. These programs play a vital role in supporting young people's physical, social and emotional well-being and helping to build important academic and life skills. NRPA strives to expand access to evidence-based youth development programs that increase the protective factors around youth to support their long-term well-being, career-readiness and academic success.

Centering equity is critical to increasing access to park and recreation programming and creating inclusive, resilient and thriving communities. [According to NRPA's 2023 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Parks and Recreation report](#), six in seven park and recreation leaders agree that park and recreation inequity is a national problem. Many communities within the United States, particularly communities of color and other marginalized groups such as women, LGBTQIA+, immigrants, people with low income and people with disabilities, lack the opportunity to experience and engage in high-quality parks and recreation (read NRPA's [Equity in Parks and Recreation](#) for a historical perspective on this). With these realities in mind, there is ample opportunity to intentionally build equitable policies and practices into youth development programs to expand access to these opportunities and ensure participants (e.g., mentees, mentors, staff and volunteers) of diverse backgrounds and identities feel welcome.



## Language Matters

Language can either help to create a culture of inclusion or perpetuate stigma and bias. Language is constantly evolving, so reviewing program materials on an annual basis like policy guides, application forms, outreach flyers and training materials can help ensure the language used is current and applicable. When possible, gather input from youth about what language resonates or holds stigma for them and adapt program materials to reflect their input. [NRPA’s Equity Language Guide](#) and [Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Language Guide](#) offer recommendations for terms to use and avoid.

Using asset-based language is one way to flip the script from focusing on what is wrong or needs to be fixed in a group of young people to recognizing the strengths they bring. The former can imply that a young person is inadequate or needs saving — by a program or mentor — while the latter brings their potential to the forefront while recognizing that we are shaped, but not defined, by our circumstances and live in a world with systemic inequities.

Deficit-based framing:	Asset-based framing:
Our program serves at-risk youth from low-income neighborhoods with a goal of reducing school suspension and improving academic outcomes.	Our program supports youth in achieving their academic potential and overcoming life’s challenges to become confident young leaders.



K.I.N.G. Academy participants pose for a photo. Photo courtesy of Burlington (North Carolina) Recreation and Parks.



## Equity in Practice for Mentoring Programs

NRPA's Equity in Practice program is based on the reality that we can all perpetuate racism — and that we can all take action to dismantle it. It is specifically designed for park and recreation professionals who are ready to bring equity to their everyday work versus just talking about it. This model is broken down into four core competencies, which are described below with their applicability to youth mentoring programs. These competencies can be applied to any youth development context with athlete/coach, program staff/young person, teacher/student taking the place of mentor/mentee. These competencies can help staff, volunteers and youth alike grow in their ability to form connections across differences and create a culture of respect.



**Competency 1 – Self-Awareness:** *Demonstration of the ability to recognize one's own emotions, thoughts and values and understand how that impacts their behavior. Demonstrate awareness of multiple group identities and their dynamics and consistently bring a high level of self-awareness, empathy and social skills to professional and interpersonal interactions.*

### Mentors who practice self-awareness:

- Recognize the significance of one's role as a mentor and the impact on the mentee. Mentors should be clear on what their role is and is not.
- Understand how one's thoughts, values and feelings impact challenging real-life decisions and interactions. Mentors own their intentions AND impact.
- Acknowledge their own identities and how those identities might influence their mentoring approach. This understanding can help them guide youth in a way that is respectful and acknowledges their unique perspectives.

### Mentees who practice self-awareness:

- Understand how actions impact those around us.
- Have conversations about identity and taking pride in one's background, culture and identity.
- Identify interests and explore those interests while trying new things.



**Competency 2 – Direct Communication:** *Communicate clearly and directly with others, working to match intent and impact in interactions. Be proactive in resolving conflicts and misunderstandings – especially across differences. Consistently give both positive and developmental feedback to support learning, excellence and personal growth.*

### Direct communication for mentoring programs:

- Engage in open and honest dialogue with mentees and become comfortable with uncomfortable conversations. This takes practice and may be intimidating for mentors at first. Creating spaces during mentor training to role play different scenarios and talk about handling conflict or feedback can help. Ultimately, direct communication helps mentors and mentees build authentic connections and work toward common goals.
- Communicate expectations, boundaries and intentions clearly. Things that can make this easier:
  1. Having a program policy manual for mentors and parents/caregivers along with an orientation to the program for each
  2. Developing a group code
    - o A group code should be created at the beginning of a program in collaboration with mentors and mentees. It should be clear, fair and manageable and lay out boundaries and rules for participants to feel safe.
- Center youth voice. Centering young people’s input in decisions that impact them, such as program design and policies, is critical to ensuring youth are engaged.
- Create opportunities for feedback. Encourage mentees, families and mentors to provide feedback on their experiences in the program and provide mechanisms for them to do so (e.g., surveys and focus groups).



Youth mentees participate in an art lesson with mentors. Photo courtesy of Monroe County (Michigan) Opportunity Program.





**Competency 3 – Relationships Across Difference:** *Proactively build and sustain robust, authentic and productive working relationships with colleagues and communities across race and other group identities.*

### Relationships across difference for mentoring programs:

- Embrace diversity and foster connections across various identities and experiences. Use conversations, games and activities for mentors and mentees to learn about each other, make connections and discover – and embrace – their similarities and differences.
- Consider the whole picture when matching program participants. Participants may share the same racial or ethnic background and have different life experiences, or they may be from different socioeconomic backgrounds and share the same interests. When matching a mentee to a mentor, consider factors including but not limited to skills, goals, interests, dislikes, life experiences, gender identity and race.
- Actively work to bridge gaps and celebrate differences. Monitor individual and group matches to identify areas where a mentor or mentee might need some extra support and step in early to provide that support if needed. This is critical to creating a space where youth feel valued and understood and will contribute to creating empathetic and long-lasting relationships.



**Competency 4 – Race Equity Analysis:** *Clearly and consistently articulate a sophisticated understanding of racial equity and structural racism. Integrate that knowledge into work projects and interactions by addressing structural implications and disproportionate impacts of policies, activities and decisions on race, class and other group identities within the context of job function, responsibilities and projects.*

### Race equity analysis for mentoring programs:

- Looks at historic disinvestment and access to park and recreation youth development programming in a community and can help to determine where and how to offer the program.
- Considers which stakeholders will be engaged. Anticipates positive outcomes and possible unintended consequences or negative outcomes for certain youth, what barriers to participation exist and how the program will intentionally further racial equity.
- Helps program staff understand the intersection of race and lived experiences for program participants. This process also can transfer to understanding other marginalized identities for mentees and families, such as disability, immigration status, LGBTQIA+, English as a second language (ESL), and what support or modifications are needed for their full participation.
- Equips mentors and program staff with the knowledge to address and discuss issues of race and inequality. Open conversations about power, race and privilege can help mentees navigate these challenges in their own lives and advocate for systemic change. For a deeper dive on navigating conversations about power, read MENTOR’s [Youth-Led Advocacy Guide](#).



## Case Study:

In North Carolina, Burlington Recreation and Parks strives to create safe spaces for young people to engage in recreational activities. Burlington is a recipient of NRPA’s Mentoring for Youth Impacted by Substance Misuse grant and has used this funding to expand its mentoring program, Keep Inspiring the Next Generation (K.I.N.G.) Academy. K.I.N.G. Academy is a mentoring program for boys ages 9 through 13 focused on leadership, life skills, STEAM and recreation. Bobbi Ruffin-Alston, recreation superintendent, and Zion Cash, director of Mayco Bigelow Community Center, share their reflections below on how they prioritize equity and create a culture of inclusivity through this program.

### How did K.I.N.G. Academy Start? ←

Burlington’s youth mentoring program was born out of a difficult conversation with a young man who was involved in gang life. Burlington Recreation and Parks staff recognized the power of their community center as a safe space and brainstormed how they could leverage that space knowing that other young men in the community might be experiencing the same challenges.

### How does K.I.N.G. Academy prioritize representation? ←

Burlington Recreation and Parks prioritizes parent involvement in K.I.N.G. Academy and encourages families to share their opinions and thoughts to help make the program better. Something parents called out early on was that they wanted more mentors who looked like the youth in the program. As a result, the program staff prioritized creating a diverse pool of mentors from the community. One way staff accomplishes this is through a partnership with Elon University and their Kernodle Center for Civic Life, as well as the Elon University Athletic Department. Through the partnership with Elon University, college students from diverse backgrounds, majors and genders, including student-athletes from various sports such as soccer, tennis, basketball and football, can sign up to serve as mentors at K.I.N.G. Academy. Additionally, K.I.N.G. Academy staff have a relationship with the Omega Psi Phi — a historically Black fraternity — graduate chapter in Burlington, which comprises a group of men of various ages who are lawyers, pastors, doctors, dentists, business professionals, barbers and more. The mentees love working with these mentors, and it’s a positive experience for them to see mentors who are successful and who look like them. The mentees also benefit from being exposed to mentors from all different backgrounds and interests who they may not have the chance to meet outside of K.I.N.G. Academy.





## What does equity in practice look like for K.I.N.G. Academy? ←

By building skills in equity and inclusion with mentors, K.I.N.G. Academy strives to create a culture of inclusivity for mentees. One strategy to support this is for mentors to identify certain things about themselves to help understand how showing up as mentors in the program impacts everybody around them, including mentees and other mentors. Program staff build that understanding by hosting trainings to enhance self-awareness for mentors and doing activities at these trainings, such as displaying posters around a room that highlight different social identities, careers, races, etc., and asking each mentor to go to the poster that resonates most with them. Activities like this have led to open conversations about seeing how others see themselves and learning more about each other and building respect. They have also done a similar activity with mentees, which gave them the space to explore different qualities about themselves and to share with their peers and mentors.

K.I.N.G. Academy also brings in guest speakers to provide different perspectives and present on topics. One example of this was the Burlington Police Department, which spoke with the boys about leadership. Program staff weren't sure how the conversation would go, but they found that mentors and mentees opened up about how to have more positive interactions with law enforcement — and that conversation turned into talking about racial profiling and stereotypes. It was a very healthy discussion where not everyone agreed, but they were able to talk about how race shows up and impacts each other based on implicit biases. Having a space where all program participants can have a healthy dialogue about differences is something that K.I.N.G. Academy prides itself on.

## What is the ripple effect of K.I.N.G. Academy? ←

K.I.N.G. Academy is setting an example of equity work for the rest of the department, if not the rest of the city. There is a 12-year difference in life expectancy from the east side of the city to the west side, and that directly correlates to access to resources and programs. By having a more equity-focused approach, K.I.N.G. Academy aims to set an example for other programs to follow.

As Bobbi Ruffin-Alston, the recreation superintendent and one of the founders of the K.I.N.G. Academy, shares, “It is only now that we’re having these open and honest conversations about race and how that impacts our programs. It is only recently that we started to collect demographic information to know who we’re even serving in our program. And we’re starting this with K.I.N.G. Academy but branching out to other programs within our department. So as our world is changing, we have to change, too, or we’re going to get left behind. We want to make sure that we are implementing programs where everyone belongs, even if it’s just small things. Small things are big things.”

## Conclusion

Local park and recreation agencies provide ample opportunities for youth to build positive social connections that contribute to their development. Through mentoring in parks and recreation, NRPA supports agencies in their efforts to build equitable, effective and evidence-based mentorship programs that connect youth with caring and compassionate mentors while strengthening connections across community.

By centering the core competencies of NRPA's Equity in Practice program in youth programs, park and recreation professionals can help to create a culture of inclusion and ensure supportive relationships are accessible to youth.



Mentors and mentees in K.I.N.G. Academy listen to a guest speaker. Photo courtesy of Burlington (North Carolina) Recreation and Parks.



## Acknowledgements

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) would like to thank the following organizations and individuals for contributing, providing feedback and developing this guide:

### Primary Author

- Olivia Peterson, Program Manager, NRPA

### Contributing Authors

- Zion Cash, Community Center Director, Burlington Recreation and Parks
- Tiff Cunin, Senior Manager of Education – Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, NRPA
- Maureen Neumann, Senior Program Manager, NRPA
- Bobbi Ruffin-Alston, Recreation Superintendent, Burlington Recreation and Parks

### 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).

This resource is supported by Grants #15PJDP-22-GG-03735-MENT and 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.