

Cities Connecting Children to Nature Focus Group Report

Summer 2016



Photo by Igor Morski

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Introduction

The City of Grand Rapids through Our Community's Children (OCC) received a grant from the Children & Nature Network to develop a plan to enhance authentic connections between nature and young people of color who are living in Grand Rapids. Grand Rapids (pop.190,739) is the second largest and fastest growing city in Michigan. Twenty five percent (25%) of its population are children of which 63% are persons of color.

Our Community's Children assembled a *Cities Connecting Children to Nature* advisory group to leverage the work that's already being done in this arena and to establish a vision so that "all Grand Rapids youth have equitable access to natural places and spaces for a happy and healthy life." Equitable includes consideration of race, gender, disability, and culturally relevant opportunities that are "abundant, indepth, meaningful, and diverse." As part of this work, three youth-led focus groups were conducted in the summer of 2016. These focus groups served as a follow-up from the annual KidSpeak® 2016 youth forum where 28 youth gave testimony about how to make Grand Rapids a greener city. Key recommendations derived from these focus groups will help inform the City of Grand Rapids' Parks & Recreation Dept.'s master planning process and most importantly, lift up the voices of young people who live within neighborhoods that do not have quality access to open spaces within walking distance.

Executive Summary

The qualitative and quantitative data in this report represents responses from 19 youth in grades 6th through 12th who voluntarily participated in a focus group to let their voices be heard, to make recommendations to the Cities Connecting Children to Nature implementation plan and to ultimately inform the City's Parks & Recreation Master Plan process. Youth spoke candidly and were excited to have been given their first experience to participate in a focus group. All 19 participants were middle and high school teens of color with the majority of participants in high school. One can conclude that high school teens have more flexibility in how they spend their free time and therefore their motivations to connect with nature may vary from their elementary-aged counterparts. This report reflects this fact.

Focus group participants were asked a series of questions co-developed by trained youth facilitators. 84% of respondents reported that they enjoyed "hanging out outside." When asked about the benefits of nature, youth responded by saying that nature provides fresh air, beauty, and mental health benefits. Respondents were also asked to describe their activities when they spent time outside. Respondents reported that they play sporting activities with friends such as soccer and basketball, take pictures outside, meet with friends in the park to sit and talk, ride

bikes, and take walks.

Respondents reported that the use of technology wasn't a prevalent method of connecting with nature. Outside of a popular video game, Pokémon Go, and taking selfies outside, there was no clearly defined nor widespread role that technology played in this area of their lives. However, respondents suggested that a phone application should be created to identify the location of local parks that contains a rating system created and utilized by youth. This rating system would be scored by youth on popularity and usage of the parks.

In all three focus groups, the highest concentration of discussion and input centered around park improvement recommendations. Recommendations fell into the following categories: Maintenance, Youth-led Activities, Tree Canopy and Park Bench Expansion, and Safety. 100% of respondents in each focus group mentioned every category of these recommendations and agreed that if improvements were made, they would be more likely to visit a park.

Methodology

Our Community's Children's program coordinator recruited youth facilitators from its youth programs: Mayor's Youth Council, LEAD and KidSpeak 2016. Three youth volunteered their time to be trained in focus group facilitation. As part of this process, they co-developed the focus group questions, created a slide presentation and developed a



one-paged infographic that highlighted facts about the natural infrastructure in Grand Rapids. This was disseminated to each focus group. The youth facilitators also met with a Parks & Recreation project coordinator for an overview of the City's Parks & Recreation Master Plan process prior to focus group facilitation.

The same set of questions was asked at each focus group by the same youth facilitators and OCC program coordinator. All focus groups were digitally recorded. In addition, the OCC program coordinator took notes and a youth facilitator served as photographer to visually capture the discussions.

The 19 youth who participated in one of three focus groups were participants in summer programming facilitated by Camp Blodgett, Creative Youth Center and the Grand Rapids Urban League. A focus group was conducted at each site.

Youth facilitators guided the focus group participants through an agenda that included the following: Introductions, OCC Overview, Icebreakers, Project Overview, Focus Group Video

Example, Rules of Engagement, Focus Group Questions, and a Wrap-Up. Focus groups were 45 minutes to 1-½ hours in length, depending upon the size of the group. Youth facilitators created an inclusive atmosphere so that participants would feel comfortable answering questions openly and honestly. Students were also given the opportunity to hand-write a recommendation to Mayor Rosalyn Bliss. A list of those recommendations appear in Appendix D.

Recommendations

The recommendations given by youth on how to bolster authentic connections to nature were consistent across the three focus groups. The majority of youth defined their time in nature within the parameters of a park and for the most part did not include other natural places and spaces. The following recommendations are framed in that manner.



1. **Intensify maintenance efforts.** Focus group participants agreed that a clean park takes community ownership as well as maintenance by a local municipality and/or school district. Youth were also very adamant about all parks being smoke-free to not only eliminate air pollution but also the remnants of cigarette buds that are prevalent in some parks. Youth also suggested that the presence of recycle bins in the parks would assist in making them cleaner as well.
2. **Provide opportunities for youth-led/themed activities in the parks year-round.** Youth said that they would spend more time outside if there were more youth-oriented and youth-led activities within the parks year-round. One focus group suggested that complimentary lessons in skiing and snowboarding could be offered to inner-city youth of color to expose them to winter sporting activities. Many of the youth indicated that that they would use a complimentary bus pass, if offered, to get to a park if there was an activity occurring there that they found worthwhile. Overall, youth stated the types of activities that would draw them to local parks are the following: free picnics, concerts, writing and art workshops, talent shows, and sporting competitions.
3. **Increase the tree canopy as well as seating areas.** A popular activity among teens within parks is simply enjoying one another's company, especially during the summer months. However, when temperatures rise, teens in the focus groups said that a park that doesn't have an ample tree canopy to use for shade will not be frequented. Therefore, lack of tree

canopy is a deterrent to park attendance. Alongside this notion is the need for more seating areas in parks. Teens expressed that this amenity is paramount.

4. **Foster a greater sense of safety.** Respondents mentioned that the parks they use more often than not have to be 1) within walking distance from their home and 2) foster a greater sense of safety and security. Teens mentioned the lack of maintenance and upkeep at some of the parks attracts illegal activity and therefore those parks are deemed undesirable and underutilized. Some respondents suggested police officers be more present in the parks. Others said that an increase in law enforcement would actually be off-putting. Teens suggested that the surrounding community should be made to feel like parkland is an extension of their property so that they'd help to maintain it and provide an extra layer of security.

Conclusion

Across the three focus groups, youth participants had a positive attitude toward nature. Their connections to nature were very similar. The fundamental benefits of nature were not lost on them but instead were held as a sacred asset to be cherished and sustained by youth, community and government. When asked for their points-of-view in an environment free from censorship and criticism, youth will be candid and honest. The recommendations cited in this report are the personification of this.

“Being outside is best when you’re going through something. It’s good to hear literally nothing but birds and trees and no one talking.” – Milan, 12th grade

Appendix

- A. Focus Group Questions
- B. List of Student Facilitators
- C. Grade Level of Participants
- D. Quotes

Appendix A: *Focus Group Questions*

1. By a show of hands, who likes to hang out outside?
2. On a scale of 1 to 5; 1 being “I don’t feel good about nature” and 5 being “I feel great about nature,” how would you rate your feeling about nature?
3. When you’re outside, what do you do?
4. Who goes to parks? And with whom?
5. a. What’s your favorite park? And why?
b. What’s your least favorite park? And why?
6. What comes to your mind when you think of “nature?”
7. What are the benefits of connecting to nature?
8. a. For those of you that don’t like to hang out outside, why not?
b. What are your least favorite spaces outside?
c. If you’re not a fan of nature, what needs to happen to change your mind?
9. What would you like to see in the public parks or spaces that are not there already? If those things were implemented, would that increase your likelihood to frequent those spaces more often?
10. What public spaces in your neighborhood could improve? Improvements can include maintenance, safety, beautification, things to do, etc.
11. Do you think some areas of the city have nicer green spaces than others? If so, why do you think that is?
12. a. Do you use technology to connect with nature? If so, in what way?
b. How can more connections be made with or without technology?

Appendix B: *List of Student Facilitators*

1. Miles Taylor, 2016 Graduate of University Prep. Academy
2. Daniel Carracheo, 12th-grade student at City High/Middle School
3. KimVy Nguyen, 12th-grade student at East Kentwood High School

Appendix C: *Grade Levels of Participants*

- 6th – 1
- 7th – 2
- 8th – 0
- 9th – 5
- 10th – 3
- 11th – 6
- 12th – 2

Appendix D: *Student Statements to the Mayor*

1. Keep our streets clean of everything bad. – Jason, 9th grade
2. I think you can make the communities better by stop having people smoking around kids with asthma. Also, I think you should give out free bus passes to families every 2 months please. – Barrett, 11th grade
3. I was wondering if you could fix up the parks so that they can be more safer. Just fix the ground so that people don't get hurt. Also the streets and sidewalks too. – Davia
4. To better connect me to nature if there were more better playground toys like swings and slides and stuff. – Aiyanna, 12th grade
5. I think if bus passes were free, I would start going to parks and exploring nature more often. If people start helping out to keep nature clean. – Alaisha, 9th grade
6. Keep parks and nature clean of trash. A swimming pod in all parks. P.S. please. – Steven, 9th grade
7. I think that you should tell people to clean up and stop throwing trash around people's houses or close to their parks so they can be cleaner and make sure grass is neat and parks are clean. Build more houses, jobs and more parks. – Talaya, 7th grade