



**AGES 11–23**

**Supporting staff to:**

# FOSTER OUTDOOR EXPLORATION

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Foster Outdoor Exploration is a young person's experience with an adult who encourages them to explore natural environments and develop a personal interest in the outdoors.

Fostering outdoor exploration involves promoting young people's interest in the natural environment and exploring the relationship with other living and nonliving things. This is a Focused Experience for young people, one that specifically bolsters Outdoors SEL.



[helloinsight.org](https://helloinsight.org)



[info@helloinsight.org](mailto:info@helloinsight.org)



888-456-6085

# WHAT

## DOES FOSTER OUTDOOR EXPLORATION LOOK LIKE AS A PART OF OUR PROGRAM?

High quality outdoor exploration can boost young people's well-being. However, creating high quality outdoor exploration in your program may be challenging. Adults who foster outdoor exploration in their programs know what young people need to learn, what they find interesting and important, and what will be challenging for them.

### RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES

#### \* [ONE]

**Create outdoor experiences that young people will experience for the first time.** Ask young people about what they know about the outdoor experiences in which they are about to engage. Based on their answers, think about the new knowledge they could gain or new skills they could develop in your program. Identify a few ways in which you can incorporate this learning in your program.

#### \* [TWO]

**Plan outdoor activities that young people find interesting or meaningful.** Ask young people about what they find interesting or meaningful about the outdoors. Plan projects or activities based on their responses. This will promote deeper engagement. Projects or activities gain meaning when young people understand their purpose, importance, and impact. Guide young people to understand the purpose and importance of the outdoors. Help them to see how their actions impact the outdoors.

#### \* [THREE]

**Encourage young people to express their thoughts and feelings about their outdoor experiences.** Ask them to reflect deeply, and describe and give meaning to their observations. Help them explore how their environment and people with whom they engage may influence these thoughts and feelings. Encourage them to share these thoughts and feelings with their peer group. Then help them recognize that different people may interpret the same experience in unique ways.

#### \* [FOUR]

**Support young people as they encounter and take on outdoor challenges.** Pay attention to those who may be having a hard time with your program's activities. Ask young people to talk about the challenges they face in your program. For those who take on these challenges, give them feedback on the effort they invest and the strategies they use to approach such challenges.

# WHY

## IS FOSTER OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES IMPORTANT?

When young people are involved in outdoor exploration, they strengthen their ability to express emotions, think about others' feelings, develop stronger bonds with their peers, and create positive narratives about their self-worth (Ernst & Theimer, 2013). Outdoor exploration promotes these outcomes when adults provide young people with opportunities to engage with their environment, from community spaces to state parks and zoos. These experiences tend to be less structured and more novel than what young people experience at school everyday, which creates unique opportunities to learn about their peers and themselves.

### DISCOVERIES FROM HELLO INSIGHT

Young people are dynamic and full of promise, with many different pathways to success. We continually mine our growing HI Outdoors dataset, made up of thousands of young people. This lets us continue to learn what works for every young person.

In 2022, we looked at our dataset of more than 6,000 young people, participating in more than 70 programs across more than 20 states. We found that Foster Outdoor Exploration is highly predictive of Outdoors SEL development, especially for young women and young people of color (those identifying themselves as Black or African American, Latinx, Asian, Indian, or two or more races).

# HOW

## HAVE OTHER PROGRAMS INCORPORATED FOSTER OUTDOOR EXPLORATION?

You can incorporate Foster Outdoor Exploration in a wide variety of interventions and programs. Here is how some Hello Insight members have integrated this practice into their programs.

### PROGRAM EXAMPLES

#### At GOALS Youth River Expeditions, staff encourage young people to take healthy risks while they explore the outdoors.



Almost everything about river expeditions is new to young people. Staff invite young people to try new and challenging things in a space where they can use their mistakes and failure as opportunities for growth. This creates an environment where young people encourage one another and celebrate each other's accomplishments.

#### Inward Discovery Grows Outdoors staff foster outdoor experiences by offering young people choices.




Staff propose activities and ask young people to choose the problem and approach to solving it. Staff then scaffold activities and iterate on them to prepare young people for more challenging activities. With this approach, staff are there to guide young people's self-discovery and their connection to the wonders of their environment.

# HOW

## CAN OUR PROGRAM BEST SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO FOSTER OUTDOOR EXPLORATION?

Use this table to explore how your program incorporates the research-based practices and how you might integrate them in the future. We recommend you complete this activity with other staff members!

PRACTICES	BRIGHT SPOTS	ACCELERATORS	CHALLENGES
Ways to support young people	Examples of what the program already does	Ways you could easily incorporate this practice	What might make this practice difficult to do
Create outdoor experiences that young people will experience for the first time.			
Plan outdoor activities that young people find interesting or meaningful.			
Encourage young people to express their thoughts and feelings about their outdoor experiences.			
Support young people as they encounter and take on outdoor challenges.			



This guide is part of a set meant to help youth-serving programs incorporate research-based experiences. Visit [www.ins.gt/pyd-exp](http://www.ins.gt/pyd-exp) to learn more.

■ View a full list of citations at [www.ins.gt/citations](http://www.ins.gt/citations)



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