



Open Connections Magazine

Issue 79 | Winter 2021-2022

Mission

Open Connections Magazine is a print publication devoted to extending the work of Open Connections, Inc.—our non-profit organization—beyond the physical boundaries of the Open Connections Campus—our education center located on a twenty-eight-acre farm in a western suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The work of Open Connections, Inc., is to promote an approach to human development that we refer to as Open Education. It includes: an emphasis on self-directed learning (as opposed to a compulsory curriculum); experiential learning (doing something vs. only hearing or reading about it); conceptual development (valuing comprehension more than memorization); flexible thinking (the ability to innovate and create solutions when conventional answers aren't sufficient); collaboration (vs. competition); real work (vs. make-work); and process consciousness (an awareness of how the quality of process impacts on the probability of success in any sort of undertaking).

Open Connections Magazine exists primarily to espouse this approach to Open Education in general and OC's process consciousness in particular. We welcome submissions by writers devoted to exploring the importance of Open Education in their own lives and/or in the lives of their young people. Additionally we welcome artwork by adults and youth who are striving to find a voice in photography (or in other forms of artwork that can be photographed clearly for publication).

Staff

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We want to hear from you: To contact Open Connections Magazine, e-mail us at oc.magazine@openconnections.org. Unsolicited articles and photography submissions are welcome. A word about photography: Unless specified by a caption, photographs are independent of articles and do not illustrate their content. Sign up to receive Open Connections Magazine free as a PDF e-magazine at: www.openconnections.org/oc-blog. Keep grandparents, friends, and neighbors up to date on OC articles, news, and events by encouraging them to sign up too! For each issue, you will receive an e-mail listing the contents of the magazine as well as a link to download the publication in its entirety. You may also view previous articles on the same web page. Open Connections Magazine is published and distributed by Open Connections, Inc. 1616 Delchester Road, Newtown Square, PA 19073, (610) 459-3366, www.openconnections.org. Open Connections is a 501(c)3, tax-exempt non-profit organization.

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Cover: Juni and Delillah enjoy time with the chickens. Through handling and caring for the chickens, Open Program youth learn about kindness and sensitivity to others.

Left: Evelyn brainstorms the possibilities for a model city that she and her peers will build collaboratively in Choice B: Geometrocity.

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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Margaret Welsh



As I write this morning, the Gathering Space is humming with activity. The youth in the Group IV and Shaping Your Life Programs have planned a Thankful Meal. They are doing all the preparations, including handmade decorations, and delicious dishes. There are delightful smells wafting from the kitchens and the weather has cooperated with a 70 degree day, so with the windows and doors open we will be comfortable. I am incredibly thankful for the OC community.

This year, each issue of the Open Connections Magazine will be devoted to one of the three broad life skills areas that we focus on nurturing at OC—Interpersonal,

Intrapersonal, and Impersonal. This issue is devoted to the ways in which interpersonal skills are developed in the various programs at OC. Take a journey with us and read vignettes from each program. Interpersonal skills are vital to our daily lives, and for all ages.

Continue on the journey with our regular columns and interviews, helping us connect and get to know each other and our campus better. Our Annual Giving drive this year is centered around Creating Connections. We would love to hear from you—how are you connected with Open Connections? How has Open Connections influenced you?

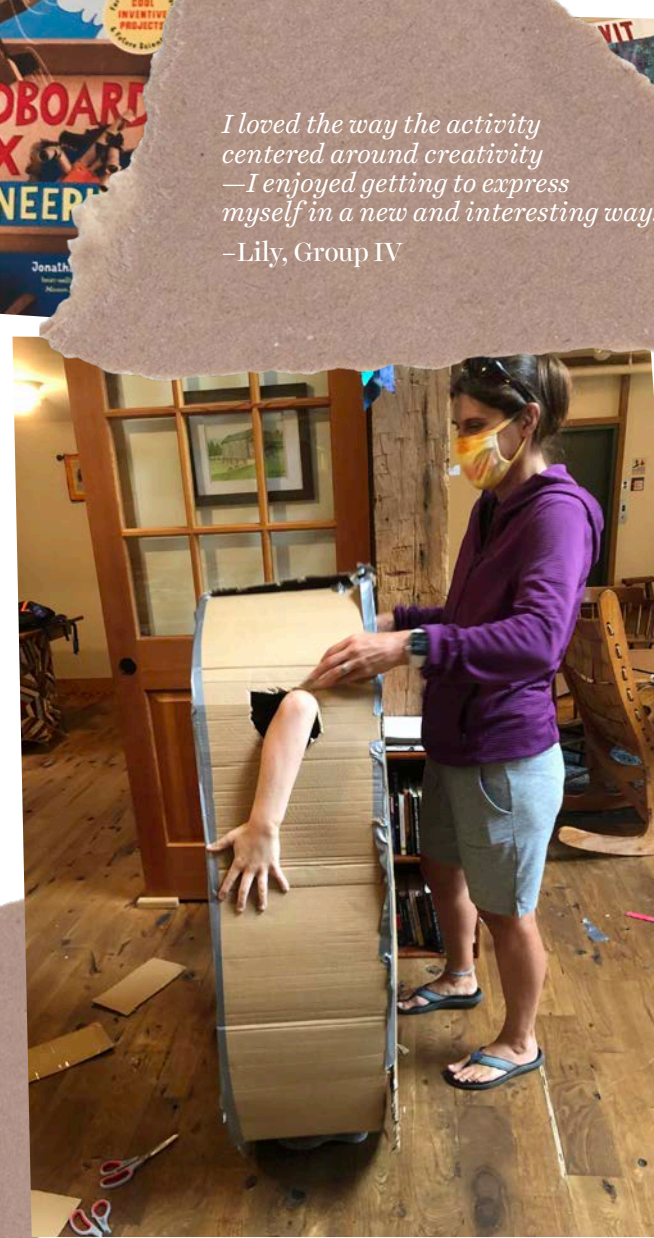
I hope you find inspiration in these pages.

Gratefully,

Margaret



Ari carefully stages a prehistoric scene with many types of dinosaurs during Open Program.



THE GLOBAL CARDBOARD CHALLENGE

I loved the way the activity centered around creativity — I enjoyed getting to express myself in a new and interesting way.
—Lily, Group IV

I appreciated the idea someone gave me to make a Jack-in-the-box. It was fun to do that and make everyone laugh.
—Jack, Group I

I thought this was a really great project. It was specific enough to cause creative thinking but vague enough to create a sense of uniqueness.
—Elliot, Group III



I appreciated the cardboard challenge. It was a lot of teamwork. Me and Josh and Annabelle put a lot of work into it. I was really happy with our project. It amazed me.
—Brendan, Group I



I liked that all groups participated. It was nice seeing the other programs' builds.
—Hannah, Group IV

Interpersonal Skills *at Open Connections*

Group IV and Shaping Your Life youth join together for a game of Giants, Elves & Wizards, similar to a team version of Rock, Paper, Scissors. In this photo, the team of Sarah (facilitator), Evelyn, Kylie, Declan, Jamie, Locke, Indiana, Lily, Ella, Ruby, Norah, and Aminah display a Wizard, defeating the Giants displayed by Hannah, Søren and Aria, while Heather (facilitator) watches the action.



We are delighted to share with you a journey through our programs and how they nurture interpersonal skills in the youth of our community. In this, and the next two issues of the Open Connections Magazine we will be sharing with you a window into how broad life skills are nurtured in the programs at OC. As an introduction, here is a snippet from our Fall Open Connections Magazine:

Our mission at Open Connections is to help young people develop the tools and skills needed to create a life full of purpose and fulfillment. At the broadest level, this translates as a focus on Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Impersonal skills. When people leave Open Connections we hope that they are:

- Knowledgeable and confident in who they are;
- Able to communicate their needs and wishes in a respectful and effective way; and

- Prepared to tackle life's challenges and opportunities using both creative and critical thinking.

When we put a strong suite of these skills together, we have a high-functioning, strong, capable, and secure person. At Open Connections, our job is to provide young people with time and resources to develop and hone these holistic life skills. We will continue our diligent efforts to help every person in our community feel empowered to live their lives well, full of purpose and fulfillment.

Practicing *Interpersonal Skills* in the Open | ages 4-10 Program

By Michelle Brockway, Facilitator

Facilitators and young people in the Open Program actively participate in developing ways to include others, offer friendly language, find constructive and mutually satisfying solutions to disagreements, and engage in other positive social behaviors. Upon entering the Open Program (OP) each day, youth are encouraged to decide how, and with whom, they wish to spend their day. With this freedom of choice comes the respect for one's self, others, and the environment. To support youth in developing interpersonal skills we place a strong emphasis on building collaborative social skills. These life skills give youth the capability to create win-win relationships in our community and beyond.

Let's take a peek into a day this fall when three young people were enjoying the OP Environment (two-story space in the Open Program). They had set up shop, were making phone calls, and organizing the money in the register. Two additional youth walked over and entered the shop. They were quickly told there was no space for them on the lower level [of the Environment]. As I sat close by, pausing to give the youth time to collaborate and problem-solve, I watched as materials were gathered from the shop and taken to the upper level. "They're stealing," one young person yelled, as she tried to take the materials back. At this point it was time for me to offer support. I grabbed a chair and got a little closer, not speaking at first. They all paused when they noticed me and began to verbalize what was happening. I supported all of the youth in listening to each other and sharing with one another how they felt about what was happening. After communicating and problem-solving, the group of now five youth collaborated on a game and spent the next 30 minutes running the shop together. They shared materials so that all five could enjoy them, and moved things around so that everyone had more space to work. This felt like a win-win for all as they continued on with smiles and cheerful conversation.

Our days in the Open Program are filled with ample time for opportunities like this. Whether youth are problem-solving about who they will sit next to at lunch, how to share a material, finding friendly words when speaking to others, or collaborating on a large group Sandpit project, youth in the Open Program are developing their interpersonal skills...together. @



Open Program youth collaborate to create waterways in the Sandpit during the first week of programming. Youth spent time problem-solving to find a place for everyone's input. The end result was to build a dam to hold water in for youth that were wishing for deep water and a dry place for others to continue digging without the walls collapsing.



Maks and Juni share a special moment on the Open Program porch while giving love to the chickens. This was an opportunity for the two to connect and share in conversation.



During a hike in the woods, Open Program youth take a few moments to explore an old fallen down tree. This moment allowed youth to show acceptance for each individual's comfort and balance development. Experienced youth offered tips on how to best proceed across the tree while keeping one's balance.

"They're stealing," one young person yelled, as she tried to take the materials back. At this point, it was time for me to offer support."



Open Program youth and facilitators collaborate to create a wind tunnel under the parachute during a game of "Common Attributes." It was a team effort to lift the parachute while holding tight so it was not taken off by the wind. There were lots of smiles and laughter as youth took turns running under the parachute.



(Above) Ari, Maks, and Ethan work diligently to follow a pattern and create a marble roll in the Open Program. The three spent lots of time problem-solving on how to have a smooth pathway for the marble to roll through. They showed satisfaction with the end result through smiles and cheers.



Open Program youth, Lila and Charlie, work together to take apart an old stereo amplifier and check out its inner workings. This activity allows youth the opportunity to explore electrical circuits and pathways and develop an understanding of 'HOW THINGS WORK.'

Fostering *Interpersonal Skills* in Group I | ages 7-9

By Jane Sleutaris, Facilitator

The culmination of a day's worth of working together found the Group I youth sitting down together. After sitting, they sip tea, eat finger sandwiches, and get to know one another better at their first Last-Thursday-of-the-Month Tea Party. The youth had divided up tasks to make sandwiches, brew tea, gather and carry supplies outside, collect nature items for a centerpiece, and set the table.



“Doing real work together instills a sense of ownership in our program. When youth see the fruits of their collaborative efforts, they feel a sense of accomplishment.”

Sharing Prompt

Each program day, after Group I youth put their belongings in their cubbies, one of the first things they see is the large white board hanging on the wall, next to the cubby closet. On the white board is a prompt that invites youth to respond on the whiteboard, either in writing or with an illustration. Youth are encouraged to pause and take notice of their peers' responses. Sometimes we look at the board as a group, and sometimes youth visit the board on their own at different times throughout the day. Some prompts from this fall include, “Something I like to do on a rainy day...”, “My favorite collaborative game is...”, “Something I'd like the group to know about me...”. In addition to developing written communication skills, the paramount goal of these prompts is to help youth learn more about one another, to give them an opportunity to express their thoughts and preferences, to establish their individuality, and to create a healthy group culture that places value on sharing.

Group Reflection Time

At the close of the program day, we each share an Appreciation. Group I youth also take time to reflect on the day by responding to two questions: What worked well today? and, Is there anything you wish had been different? This provides valuable feedback for both youth and facilitators. Reflection time gives young people the opportunity to speak in front of others and share celebrations or raise concerns in a safe environment. It is of great value to see things through the eyes of the youth and discover how they interpret the events around them. For instance, one week several youth shared a wish for less yelling and noise during an activity. Feedback like this, shared peer to peer, is impactful and provides an opportunity to reflect on personal behavior choices and how it affects the people around you. Group reflections like this furnish opportunities to make personal discoveries and learn from one other.

Real Work

Real Work has always been an important part of the OC experience. After a few days of being in program together, it was clear there was Real Work to be done at the end of each day to clean up and prepare our shared space. To this end, youth identified the potential jobs to be done. We now have a display sharing daily contributions hanging in our room. Doing Real Work together instills a sense of ownership in our program. When youth see the fruits of their collaborative efforts, they feel a sense of accomplishment.

Collaboration vs. Competition

Free choice time is incorporated into each and every day of the Group I program. Youth often look forward to this time in the day, following lunch, with great anticipation. Sandpit play generally demonstrates a picture perfect example of collaboration, as youth work together to create waterway systems, water parks, dams, towns, bridges, beach scenes, and more! Games such as traditional tag, on the other hand, tend to pit the person who is assigned



In response to a Group I building challenge to use any combination of building materials to build a home for an animal of your choice, Josh and Brendan use a combination of unifix cubes and flat wooden blocks to collaborate on a bat house.



Annabelle pauses to check her list during a Group I getting-to-know-you game. “Find someone who likes baseball... someone who has a pet... someone who is the oldest child in the family... someone who's been camping... someone who lives in West Chester...” This is an engaging game in which youth have the opportunity to mingle and ask each other questions and learn new things about one another.

the role of “It” (sometimes without his/her consent) against the rest of the group and encourages an “us versus them” mentality. Group I facilitators noticed that youth were sometimes choosing games that were competitive in nature rather than collaborative. We addressed this through a group discussion focused on defining collaboration and then culminating in the creation of a list of collaborative games (many invented by the youth!) that they now have as part of their personal repertoire of things to do during free choice time. ©

Nurturing *Interpersonal Skills* in Group II | ages 9-11

By Megan Marran, Facilitator



“We spent some time honing our interpersonal skills by playing games designed to get to know each other, devoting time at the end of the day for verbal appreciations within a group setting, negotiating through conflicts within group games, and reflecting on activities as a group.”

Left: Chris (facilitator) leads the Tuesday Group II youth in a name game. Each youth says the name of the person to whom they are throwing the ball. The ball always has to travel in the same sequence. A second ball is added to the mix and possibly another that will travel backwards. This took a great deal of concentration and communication.



Group II youth, Everleigh, Gwen, Emmy and Cataleia, tackle logic problems by using clues to deduce which farmer did which farm chore. By working out loud together youth gain confidence in tackling this kind of problem.



Above: Stealthy Overalls is a game that was created a number of years ago during a program offering called The Naturalist. The object of the game is for one team to defend a flag at the center of the meadow while another team tries to move into their territory, retrieve the flag and stealthily take it back to their own territory. This game turned out to be quite frustrating for the “attacking” team, as the meadow is dense with various vines and pricklers which made being stealthy difficult. If they kept to the mown paths they were caught quickly. At the end of the game, the youth had many ideas for how to make it feel less frustrating. Many realized that their clothing choices played a big part in how far they could get in the meadow. We will definitely be returning to this game and will have many “how-to’s” to process in the weeks to come.



The end of our days in Group II involve sharing appreciations from our time in program together. Youth are encouraged to share with the group something specific that they enjoyed from their program day.

The beginning of the year is filled with a buzz of excitement and anticipation of the opportunities a new program year will hold. Youth have many wishes and creating new friendships is high on the list. Throughout our first weeks in Group II, we spent some time honing our interpersonal skills by playing games designed to get to know each other, devoting time at the end of the day for verbal appreciations within a group setting, negotiating through conflicts within group games, and reflecting on activities as a group. Over the course of this year, youth will be exploring many different areas of interest and activities together that are designed to engage the youth as individuals and help them negotiate pro-social communication with their peers.

The Global Cardboard Challenge was a campus wide activity that included many opportunities to continue to develop our interpersonal skills. Two youth who collaborated to build a Haunted Maze together advocated for their own ideas, negotiated where they disagreed, included other youth who wished to have a role in

the project, and lastly, communicated about how to stagger people going through the maze and reset the maze between customers.

There were other youth who began their work on arcade games individually, but then later collaborated to offer their games together in an arcade setting. They made “Fun Passes” to allow customers to have several different opportunities to try each game and win tickets.

Group II shared their cardboard creations with the youth of Shaping Your Life (SYL) and each youth shared a little about their creations and their building process.

Each day in Group II offers youth the opportunity to enhance their understanding of interpersonal skills using pro-social verbal communication, using and interpreting non-verbal communications including understanding body language or tone of voice, and developing effective listening skills. There are also ample opportunities to boost team-building skills through group work, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and decision-making. ©

Cultivating *Interpersonal Skills* in Group III

| ages 11-13

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

Group III kicked off the program year with a number of team-building opportunities that organically address communication, collaborative problem-solving and conflict resolution. Youth took on several duct tape team-building challenges; Yurt Circle and Inhuman Knot involved all youth, while Rescue Stretcher and Duct Tape Draw were explored in smaller groups of three to four youth.

Yurt Circle

This challenge necessitated making a loop of duct tape large enough to allow for all youth to hold on with both hands, standing shoulder to shoulder. Some youth followed a tip to make a long strip by folding the tape in half lengthwise, with the sticky side of the tape on the inside of the fold. Other youth reasoned that they might want to be sure to reinforce where the two ends are joined to add strength and durability. Once the loop was made, youth all grabbed on with both hands, then with feet planted, leaned back on a count of three. In order to achieve this successfully, the group had to coordinate to move slowly and at the same time. Otherwise...

Inhuman Knot

Using the strip making technique from the Yurt Circle challenge, youth made 4 strips, one per pair. Then, holding fast to opposing ends of the strips, all 8 Group III youth collaborated to make the biggest, most complex, Inhuman Knot possible in 3 minutes. Lots of ducking under and weaving in and out followed, taking care not to undo any progress being made, by reversing direction on a path previously taken. Eventually all youth found their way into the fold, or knot as it were, in order to work every inch of tape into the tangle.

Rescue Stretcher

In two groups of 3 to 4 youth, teams were tasked with engineering a Rescue Stretcher, using duct tape, naturally. The stretcher would need to be strong enough to carry a team member a distance of 20 feet. As with the previous duct tape challenges, each person needed to consider how to communicate their idea(s), how to listen to other ideas, and then how to move forward with all of those ideas. In addition, how would they determine who is to be carried and who does the carrying?



Lyla ducks underneath as Group III members tie their duct tape strips into the biggest knot possible without letting go of their ends! The team-building challenge is called the Inhuman Knot.

Duct Tape Draw

Before setting out to collaboratively draw a 'simple' smiley face, teams had to work together to design a drawing tool of some sort, using a sharpie and—you guessed it—duct tape. The tool was necessary for them because the challenge specified that all team members needed to participate from the outside of a circle 10 feet in diameter, with the drawing paper placed in the center.

Although the materials required for these duct tape challenges were simple and few, each experience facilitated encounters with verbal communication (what we say and how we say it), non-verbal communication (what we communicate without words through body language and tone of voice), and listening skills (how we interpret the messages we hear). As it often goes with teamwork, negotiating, conflict resolution and mediation, problem-solving and decision-making all play a part in being able to interact and work effectively with others toward mutually agreeable outcomes. ©



Max, Thomas, Lyla and Silas use some effective communication to coordinate their efforts and collaboratively draw a smiley face within some unusual and tricky confines, during a Group III duct tape team-building challenge.

Group III youth "trust and lean" after creating a duct tape loop during a team-building challenge called Yurt Circle (visible: Elliot, Silas, Max and Danny).



“Although the materials required for these duct tape challenges were simple and few, each experience facilitated encounters with verbal communication, non-verbal communication, and listening skills.”

Strengthening *Interpersonal Skills* in Group IV

By Linda Soffer, Facilitator | ages 13-15

Helping teens to develop the abilities that will enable them to form healthy interpersonal relationships is a cornerstone of Group IV, and creative team-building is the focus for many of our early program activities. These range from partnered tasks to whole group challenges that require communication, collaboration, and varying degrees of shared problem-solving. Since teens thrive on social connections, our aim is to invite group members to channel these natural impulses in different and unexpected ways that facilitate forming bonds through having fun and facing challenges together.

On our first program day in September, the youth of Group IV took on the Alphabet Challenge. We split into two teams who stood separated by a stretch of open field. Each group then used their bodies to spell out an instruction to the other team, which attempted to receive and carry out the message. This required significant teamwork within the teams, including choosing an instruction to give and organizing the spelling out of the message. Successful communication with the other team was also critical, a process made much simpler when the receiving team actively gave feedback about their comprehension of the letters being depicted. The challenge took a significant amount of persistence and willingness to try something difficult, as forming letters with your body turns out to be harder than you might think!

Who needs to pass the baton when you can work with a partner to keep a frisbee suspended using only your elbows? Group IV partnered with the Shaping Your Life program to participate in a Wacky Relay during our first group game of the program year. Partners were assigned and props provided. The goal: circle around the cone and come back while holding your props between your bodies in some wacky designated method. In order to be successful, the partners needed to clearly communicate about their method of holding the assigned item, the pace that they were moving at, the direction that they headed, and any needs to pause and recalibrate. Some of the participants were total strangers until that very morning, but the quick bonding was apparent through all the smiles and laughter as the teams championed through the various challenges! The GIV/SYL group game happens weekly and provides an opportunity for youth in both teen programs to connect and move together in a lightly competitive context.

Interpersonal skills are best exemplified in activities that invite collaboration and cooperation. Group IV members utilized these skills in two challenges involving ropes. In the first, participants stood side-by-side and each placed one hand next to a knot on a long rope. The knots were about 12 inches apart. The task was for each participant to untie their knot with their free hand while the other hand continued to hold the rope. Untying all of the knots (eleven in all) proved to be a creative, collaborative exercise, as each person in the line was involved in some way at every step. Please, try this at home!

In the second “rope” challenge, youth worked in pairs and each wore yarn “handcuffs” (a length of yarn with slip knotted loops on either end) that were linking them together. The challenge was to “unlink” themselves without removing the ropes. Youth tried some Twister-style movements, employing critical thinking and a good bit of humor. In the end, one pair of youth figured it out and showed the rest of the group how to accomplish the feat, giving each pair a chance to try the process. ©



“Some of the participants were total strangers until that very morning, but the quick bonding was apparent through all the smiles and laughter as the teams championed through the various challenges!”

Teamwork is the name of the game as Hannah, Lily, Kylie, Evie, Linda (facilitator) and Søren use impersonal (developing spatial ability, in this case) skills to unknot a rope using one free hand only from each participant. You can certainly see the “we,” interpersonal growth, at work here as well!



Can you run to the cone and back holding this ball with your partner using nothing but your index fingers?! Group IV youth, Jaimie and Kylie, make it look like a breeze during the Wacky Relay on the first day of programs.



Evelyn and Locke work together to find the mass of the copper density cube during Group IV. This exercise required not only sharing equipment and a certain amount of manual dexterity, but also exercising judgment about when they have been successful measuring and interpreting their results.



Keeping a noodle suspended between backs, and traveling across the Front Lawn is not as easy as Declan and Indiana (of Group IV) make it look during the Wacky Relay.

Reflecting on Interpersonal Skill Development in Shaping Your Life | ages 15-18

By Shaping Your Life program members

The Shaping Your Life program is taking interpersonal learning to a whole new level this year. Our current small group has been together in programs for awhile and have transitioned quite smoothly to assuming the responsibilities of being the oldest group on campus. Through both new experiences and old favorites, these youth are deepening their bonds and discovering the new joys to be found in learning together and sharing the work. These reflections on interpersonal growth opportunities are written by the Shaping Your Life Program teens themselves.

Customizing our Program Space

The very first project the Shaping Your Life members did as a group was customizing our program space. We accomplished most of it before program even started through meetings on campus and group calls. In our first meeting we all worked together to create a “wishlist” of all of the features and/or decor items we wanted for the space. While we would eventually end up delegating the main sections of the set up and working independently, starting with this list ensured that the end product truly reflected all of our individual wishes and created a space that we all love to spend time in.

–Ruby

Back-to-Back Challenge

The back-to-back challenge is an activity used for all ages and is first introduced in the Open Program. On our first morning in Shaping Your Life we did the back-to-back challenge for the first time in years! The challenge is a great way to build our interpersonal skills. How the challenge works is two of us sit back-to-back and one person explains to the other how to create the design they have already created, and the second person tries to create the same design. This is great for working on our collaborative skills and learning how to explain something in detail and how to really listen. The back-to-back challenge is so fun because I remember this being one of my favorite activities in Open Program (the youngest group) and now I am doing it in SYL (the oldest group) and I appreciate it in a whole new way!

–Norah



Shaping Your Life members engaged in a “back-to-back building challenge to hone their communications skills. Norah follows Ella’s verbal instructions in an attempt to recreate Ella’s pattern block design accurately.

A Wave Lab

One of the first science labs Shaping Your Life did this year was a wave lab. In this lab we got paired up to find ways to demonstrate how different types of waves (i.e. liquid, light, sound, and slinky waves) work in relation to each other. I was partnered up with Norah, and we had to answer questions for the lab by doing mini experiments to see what would happen. This lab was a great way to learn about how waves interact with each other, and by being partnered up we had the valuable opportunity to bounce ideas off of each other around what experiments to do. Since we were in the same room as the other group, we could also hear some of their ideas which sparked my own new ideas for experiments.

–Aminah

Snoopy and the Red Baron

One of the many quirky games we’ve played this year is called “Snoopy and the Red Baron.” This activity was new to us all and we definitely had a blast playing it. It is a fairly simple hand movement game where we are paired in groups of two and start out by mirroring the hand movements of our partner. Then it changes into one hand chasing the other, like the Red Baron chasing Snoopy in “Peanuts”. This game had an element of chaos and was a fun way to practice non-verbal communication skills and build deeper connections with our partners. (See pic on page 27.)

–Ella ©



Ruby, Ella, Norah and Aminah, have chosen badminton as the official Shaping Your Life team sport this year.

“The very first project the Shaping Your Life members did as a group was customizing our program space. We accomplished most of it before program even started through meetings on campus and group calls.”



This year’s Shaping Your Life group members Aminah, Ruby, Norah and Ella are contributing their own perspectives and ideas to redesign the teen experience at OC.

Encouraging *Interpersonal Skills* in the Choice Programs | ages 8-15

Choice A: Lego Robotics

By Rick Sleutaris, Facilitator

Logan and Brendan were challenged to program their Lego robot to move around a tabletop and knock off small Lego walls without the robot itself falling off the tabletop. Logan and Brendan worked together, breaking up the challenge into smaller pieces, building off each other's ideas, and fine tuning their program code after each try. By the end of the day, their robot was able to knock off two of the four walls which resulted in cheers from both Logan and Brendan!



Logan and Brendan program their robot to knock down Lego walls without falling off the table in Choice A: Lego Robotics.

Choice A: Film

By Sarah Becker, Facilitator

On the set of any film, you would typically find large crews, with even more people working behind the scenes. The Choice A: Film group was dedicated and focused on creating some original films that will be featured at the upcoming OC Film Fest. From script writing, set design, wardrobe, lighting, filming, editing, technical work, and promotional material this group truly stretched and strengthened their interpersonal skills as they problem-solved and persevered!



While preparing to finish a commercial for the upcoming OC Film Festival, Annabelle and Tulsii help each other with a costume change.

Choice A: Exploring Matter

By Heather Gosse, Facilitator

In Choice A: Exploring Matter, it sometimes helps to have a companion to test out your ideas with. One week, the young people investigated the properties of several white, powdery substances from the kitchen, and another week, they investigated properties of several different clear liquids. In each instance, youth needed to use clues to identify either a mystery liquid or mystery mixtures. Having a partner with whom to not only share the work but also to check ideas increased the young people's success at identifying the unknowns.



During Choice A: Exploring Matter, Catalaia and Addie work together to explore the properties of several clear liquids. They were able to use observations from four different tests to deduce the identity of a mystery liquid. Here they are counting how many drops of each liquid will stay on top of a penny!

Choice B: Geometrocitiy

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

The intended goal in Choice B: Geometrocitiy is to collaboratively and collectively design, map, and build a model city. This goal inherently invites thoughtful communication—verbal, non-verbal and listening skills alike. Each youth chose a city section or district to create, and there was an understanding that these sections would connect with each other, requiring teamwork. The youth continued to ebb and flow among brainstorming as a group, working independently, and returning to the group with questions and ideas. Negotiating and problem-solving was essential, as many of the choices and decisions made individually might impact neighboring districts and/or the entire vision and outcome of the city.



Kaiyah and Danny put their heads together to brainstorm and collaboratively decide on features to include within the business district of the Choice B: Geometrocitiy model city, discussing details such as mapping streets, shops and their locations and the scale of the different buildings they choose to include in their design.



Lily, Evelyn, Carter, and Locke discuss the nuances of a formal debate in Choice B: Debate.

Choice B: Debate

By Anton Andrew, Facilitator

The idea of debates might feel intimidating due to their formal structure. This structure ensures fairness and helps organize arguments. In Choice B: Debates, our fast paced, informal, debate games (on topics from dessert preferences to criminal justice reform) reminded us of all the times we have 'debated,' or simply argued with our siblings, parents, friends, or otherwise. Learning about the structure of debates helps guide these conversations so that both sides hear and understand each other more fully. Playing these games in comfortable, relaxed, outdoor spaces reinforced that debating is something we do naturally. Plus, we got more time to appreciate Fall days on our lovely campus (and who is going to argue with that?!)

Choice B: OC Campus – Artistic Muse

By Kelly Dillon, Facilitator

While tuning our senses to the natural world that surrounds us within the OC campus, and then following the inspiration found there, sometimes ideas lure the attention and interest of others and can engage interpersonal skills. Albert Einstein once said, "Creativity is contagious, pass it on." Creation can create the demand of creating more. To make room and hold space for all interpretations of imagination and creative skills, what we offer in the way of feedback and how it is communicated is important. Understanding and managing emotions (ours and others) can help us navigate how we might choose to interpret and respond to verbal and non-verbal feedback.



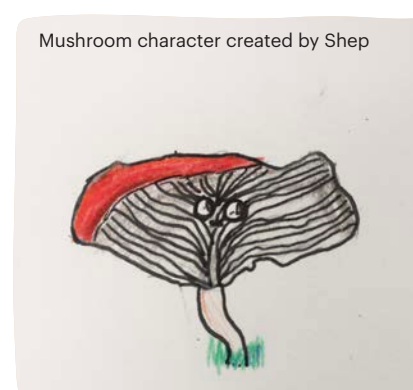
Mushroom character created by Søren



Mushroom character created by Silas



Right: This mushroom was found during a walk about the campus at Open Connections one afternoon in Choice B: Open Connections Campus – Artistic Muse, and inspired 3 artists to create 3 different character illustrations.



Mushroom character created by Shep

Choice B: Woodshop

By Chris McNichol, Facilitator

The woodshop is a great place to build a new shelf for your room, fix up that old wooden scooter or build a Nok Hockey table. It is also a great opportunity to meet new people and collaborate with peers. One youth in the woodshop noticed another youth having problems setting a nail in the end of a dowel and offered some assistance. The roundness of the dowel was proving to be a bigger issue than either had anticipated. After some trial and error and about a half hour the team successfully completed their mission. Some might see this as a ridiculous waste of time but if you step back and look at it, it was a wonderful opportunity for two youth to think outside the box, collaborate, problem-solve and accomplish a goal TOGETHER.

Albert Einstein once said,
“Creativity is
contagious, pass it on.”



Carter watches while Ollie and Max plane down a piece of maple that will be used to make cutting boards. The Planer smooths the surface of the board.

From the OC Glossary of Terms

Conflict Resolution OC Style

At Open Connections *Conflict Resolution*, not surprisingly, takes the form of creative problem-solving. The challenge is to create a win-win situation, as opposed to the win-lose predicament that dominates the perception of those in conflict. We seek to instill the belief that “you and I, working together, can win bigger than either of us alone.”

Open Connections facilitators who notice a developing conflict between two or more parties may intervene if it appears that either or both young people don’t seem to have the skills or the inclination to resolve their conflict in a constructive, respectful fashion. The facilitator begins by inquiring as to the existence of a conflict (“*Let’s check in. It seems as if there a problem here; maybe I can help.*”) Assuming confirmation of a conflict, the facilitator may then ask, “*What seems to be the problem?*” Following up with “*Well, let’s see if we can figure out how to help you get what you need here so that everyone is satisfied.*”

The facilitator then asks the youth to speak, one at a time, each one concluding his/her comments with a *How-to*¹ that captures what he/she is arguing for. When goals are stated in this *How-to* format, it has the same effect as when they do so in a *Balanced Response*: the mind shifts away from arguing and blaming and toward problem-solving.

After the first person expresses her *How-to*, the next person is directed by the facilitator to *paraphrase* his understanding of that first *How-to*. Sometimes that is all that is needed; the first paraphraser might then add, “*If that is all you want, why didn’t you say so? Sure, that’s okay with me,*”—in other words, “we have no problem here.”

At other times, the person can begin to view their “adversary” as merely being someone who wants something, just as they do, *and* that it doesn’t *have* to come at their expense. This attitude shift may not happen immediately, but it usually develops before too long.

Assuming that there is still the presumption of conflict after each party has expressed their wish (*How-to*), and *has paraphrased* their understanding of the other person’s *How-to*, the facilitator asks, in an optimistic tone of voice, “So, how can we resolve this difference so that you *both* get what you want?”

It is amazing how often one person or another sees a way to accomplish this right away. An idea is offered and immediately accepted by the other(s) and they move forward with their activities. Otherwise, the parties continue creatively problem-solving in a mutual search for a possible solution that will result in a win-win resolution.

Either way, our intent at Open Connections is to keep the program facilitator in the role of a facilitator and not as one who imposes a so-called solution. At times, it may prove helpful for the facilitator to offer a suggestion (e.g., “*I have an idea: how about if one of you uses the vise for five more minutes, then the other one gets it for five minutes.*”); however, this is only a suggestion, not a requirement. The concept of “sharing”, which is often imposed by adults in the outside world, seems to work a lot better when it is identified merely as a goal by the facilitator (“*Let’s find a way for you two to share the use of this tool*”) rather than forced. After all, we want everyone to feel good about the resolution, and leave with a sense of abundance and justice, rather than feeling deprived and thinking that they have been short-changed. As stated previously, we want to reinforce the belief that “*working together, you and I can win bigger than either of us working on our own.*”

We have found that one idea in particular has resolved many of the conflicts among our younger colleagues that involves the use of a particular tool, material or defined space in the program environment. We call this idea **Making a Time Contract**. The parties in conflict come to agree that one of them will use the item or space in question for a specific amount of time—say, five minutes—after which, the person will seek out the other and tell the other person that it is now available for their use.

¹A *Balanced Response* to a form of engagement that involves offering at least 3 positives (pluses) of the situation and then offering “opportunities for change” as *How-to*s. This format invites conversation rather than putting someone on the defensive.



We all know that homeschooling looks different for everyone. We want to know what our community does on days when the youth are not running around Open Connections. Here is a glimpse of how one family handles their days.

We asked the Rumbaugh family, Lizzie and Craig, Carter (age 11, Group II), Annabelle (age 9, Group I), and Gracie (age 6, OP), Scout and Georgie (Forever-Young-K9s) to take us along on a typical non-OC day.

We embrace an educational philosophy that recognizes growth opportunities exist around every corner, and that daily life provides endless and valuable learning experiences. Our days are joyful, intentional, varied, and, typically, pretty messy as evidenced even by a quick glimpse into our cozy home. Throughout any given non-OC day, there are many shining moments as discoveries are made, interests are pursued, ideas unfold, and efforts are realized.

We typically ease into our non-OC days slowly, savoring all that awaits, all that is possible when the time and freedom to pursue what matters most to each young person is available. Before we share breakfast, deep conversations have occurred, thoughts and questions exchanged, curiosities explored, and perspectives offered. Sometimes the conversations continue from the previous night, sometimes they are entirely new.

Beautiful stories are woven into every possible moment of our day. We value the experience of reading, both shared and independent. Our young people read for joy and in pursuit of knowledge - spending hours researching personal interests. History, Science, Math, Geography, and Mythology are frequently explored in various ways through literature.

Our young people also spend hours immersed in purposeful, productive play, play that demonstrates creative ideas, collaboration and problem-solving, and play that sometimes consists of daydreaming and thinking deeply. Our sweet Scout and Georgie are loved and cared for, often as active participants in creative play.

We treasure time outside exploring nature, and take frequent trips to preserves, parks, gardens, and trails. Time in nature is essential to us, teaching us the most wonderful lessons and inspiring moments of awe. We're always seeking to better understand and care for the earth, too. To not just enjoy the wonders of nature, but to be stewards and protectors. The Rushton Nature Keepers program offers our young people special opportunities for growth in this area.

“That’s the beauty of a new day, you never quite know where it’s going to lead.”

–Annabelle Rumbaugh (Age 9)



The most extraordinary kind of magic exists on days where childhood freedom is plentiful. Long walks in the forest end with playing in a stream, finding natural treasures, enjoying a picnic lunch, and gathering memories, occasionally with dear friends. When a book is so wonderful that it can't be put down, we have that time. Hours at the stables with beloved horses bring opportunities for learning, caring, responsibility, passion, and compassion.

No matter what the day brings, there is a lot of food prepared, shared, and enjoyed. In our home, it takes the helping hands of all to make our world go round. Everyone contributes to household chores in various ways.

There are, of course, moments of conflict and disagreement, during which understanding, patience, and compassion are practiced. Even as difficult moments arise, they teach us how to live together whole-heartedly, respectfully, and gently in what is, not always, a perfect world.

Our days become evenings that are peaceful, loving, and full of connection. We try to end our days with gratitude and a prayer of thanksgiving. Reading and more conversations eventually lead to lights out on a day well-lived, with excitement for tomorrow.

These are the days that offer the most meaningful experiences, the ones that are full of ordinary moments, time together, space for self-directed learning. When each young person gets to experience life as they wish, they are actively engaged in living fully. There is a deeply satisfying, soul-filling peace that living in the present moment and following what one enjoys, provides. Given the gifts of time, trust, freedom, and love, each day presents endless opportunities for our young people to learn and grow. ©



Community Connections is a feature that helps us get to know different members of our community. Let us know if you would like to share: oc.magazine@openconnections.org

Community Connections



Kate Brockman

I have always loved making, fixing and repurposing things. As my mother would say “making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear!” I would much rather fix the house,

than clean it, for sure. I did not know what I wanted to be until I was in college, but I knew that I was not a regular 9-5 job kind of person. Always drawn to hands-on making and doing, I transferred to art school and quickly found my tribe and my joy—clay, sculpture, foundry work, and fabrication.

I had no idea at the time that the reason I was enjoying art school so much was because it was self-directed. I knew nothing of this concept until we were considering our daughter’s educational options. A friend, and fellow OC parent, Nicole

Bailey suggested homeschooling (and OC, thank you Nicole!). Completely doubtful I could pull off such a thing, I hit the library, read a bunch of books and, as they say, mind blown! The revelation that I only enjoyed learning when I was truly invested in the subject versus the reality that most everything I had been taught in school had quickly vacated my head, was profound. It didn’t have to be this way for Ella who is currently in her 12th year at OC!

Traveling this path with our daughter has opened up new confidence in my own learning journey. It never ends and that’s a great thing. YouTube U. has also been a great help. Back to fixing the house—last summer I taught myself how to sweat copper pipes so I could tackle some not so minor plumbing issues. I am proud of my new found knowledge and bathroom renovation, but I also learned another valuable piece of information: pay a plumber whatever he or she wants!

Oh, and I also love camping, being in nature, and experiencing other cultures through travel, though I don’t do that often enough. ©

Campus Corner

by Sarah Becker, Assistant Director, Facilitator

Multimedia Creation Space

Anyone that has ventured onto the campus of Open Connections can attest to the fact that something about being on the grounds stirs inspiration. There was even a Choice Program offering this fall about the artistic muse of the Open Connections campus! When one is feeling inspired to create something, there are a number of outlets on campus for that creativity, from the Art Studio to the Makerspace; there are choices. Now, there is another space that allows for creativity to flow: the Multimedia Creation Space! In a quiet corner in the back of the Farmhouse, youth have access to some powerful tools to bring their creativity to life. We are stocked with cameras, microphones, lights, green screens, and the space to experiment.

This fall, as part of the Choice Program Film offering, youth were invited into this space as a venue for them to film and create their own original works for an upcoming OC Film Festival (February 5, 2022)! The space in this room is kept deliberately empty and open so that it can be transformed into any type of space needed, think the Room of Requirement. So far, it has been the deck of the Titanic, a forest, a castle, an ocean, a haunted

wood, and an interview suite. We can only imagine what is next for this corner of Open Connections. Some necessary accompanying spaces are conveniently located nearby: the Attic is a treasure trove of wardrobe and set design props, and the Makerspace is equipped with powerful machines capable of editing all of the footage generated in the Multimedia Creation Studio.



Multimedia creation is a wonderful springboard for building and strengthening competencies in the three broad life skill areas that are part of our purpose at OC. For the impersonal skills: mastering the equipment and tools associated with filming and editing, alongside critical time management skills are just some of the many ways to grow in this area. Intrapersonal growth happens as individuals recognize topics that excite them, and as youth step into different roles in the production process, as well as the growth they exhibit in grit and determination. As with any form of art, there is also a need to interact with other people. Interpersonal growth can be seen in the way youth collaborate to achieve their creative goals.

From conceiving an idea to writing a script, from set and wardrobe design, to acting, directing, producing, editing, and everything in between, the ways to participate in creating multimedia content are varied, plenty, and accessible. The goal of this transformative space is to allow anyone of any skill level to engage with the creation of multimedia content that will captivate audiences for years to come. We cannot wait to see what is created in this space next! ©



Marlon and Logan take time to make sure that their green screen and lego set is prepped to start filming during a collaborative stop motion project in Choice A: Film.



Youth in Tuesday Group II offer each other plenty of space and a respectful silence during a journaling activity where they created a sound map. Some youth closed their eyes in order to focus on the area a sound was coming from, others chose to draw a map of the space they were in on the OC campus to be able to mark their sounds more accurately.



During Choice A: Lego Robotics, Cataleia uses the loop command to make her robot draw patterns. She varied her original program (blue marker) only slightly and noticed that it had a significant effect on the pattern drawn (red marker).



Ruby and Aminah explore a mirroring game called Snoopy and the Red Baron during a Shaping Your Life activity (additional description on page 16).



Open Program youth, Maks, observes as Theo and Allie (facilitator) explore attribute blocks, finding the rule for the shapes that belong in the circle.



Group III youth consider their bearings, and with maps and compasses in hand, work to find their way on the orienteering course at Ridley Creek State Park.



Group IV youth Søren, Jamie, Locke, Declan and Lily sort through images to use on their Vision Boards – collages depicting their personal interpretations of “a life of purpose and fulfillment.”

INTRODUCING THE

Dempsey/Filippelli Family



Please describe your family constellation: Parents, names and ages of young people.

Ryan, Tina, Jack (7.5yrs), Owen (5yrs). Jack attends Group I on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while Owen attends the Open Program on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

How did you get involved with Open Connections?

Honestly, Google. When Jack was very young, I was googling “alternative schools” in the area, or something like that. We wound up doing the Pre-Open Program for a brief spell, though it turned out not to be a good fit for us. However, I remember seeing the Open Programmers out on the grass, doing what they do, and thinking, “Now THAT is what we want for our boys.” Each boy started in the Open Program as soon as they were old enough, and we haven’t looked back since.

What’s your family’s approach to learning?

We’re still figuring it out! Learning is a part of life. It’s not something we sit down and just get done, and then move on to the rest of our day. So while we do some more

formal schoolwork in the mornings (reading, writing, math, that sort of thing), the rest of the day varies. Real work, too, is just part of the rhythm of our days. It can be tempting—especially when they’re very young—to exclude youth from participating in the real work of everyday life. Because, honestly, it’s just quicker to sweep the floor, for example, without a toddler’s “help!” These days, they’re (usually) quick to help out wherever it’s needed—putting out the compost, setting the table, stowing laundry, etc.

We encourage the boys to follow their interests and we facilitate this as much as we can. There are days when one of the boys will come to us with an idea of something they want to do but there’s just too much going on that day, or the idea just seems too Big, and the gut reaction can be to say “No.” But if that happens too frequently, will they stop coming to us with ideas? Lately, I’ve found myself channeling my inner Jane (OC parent and facilitator) and thinking before responding, “How can I say Yes to this request?” It’s amazing how helpful that has been! In making an effort to stay open minded, I’ve found that there can be so many different ways to

meet the need that’s being communicated when one of the boys has an idea he wants to pursue.

It’s amazing to see what they come up with when we simply stay out of the way! For example—this started with Jack, but now Owen is also fully on board—they like to set up “shops” at the end of the driveway and hawk their wares to passersby. Jack will often sell things he’s made, like finger-knit necklaces or paracord bracelets, while Owen’s inventory typically consists of rocks he’s painted or stuffed animals he no longer wants. They get tables from the backyard, use five gallon buckets for stools, and flag down anyone within earshot. Sometimes they make signs. They set their own prices and make change (Jack helps Owen with that part), and boy do they drive a hard bargain! But seriously, is it play? Is it work? Does it matter? They’re definitely both learning a ton—reading/writing/spelling, math, marketing, inventory management, and so on. It’s amazing.

What led you in this direction?

Ryan and I both went to elite private schools, and didn’t realize until much later how, in many ways, our school experiences (prior to college) really damaged our innate love of learning. Still, even when we became parents, homeschooling wasn’t really on our radar. The boys both started in fairly traditional pre-school programs, ones that were play-based with lots of outside time, but they were still very much the first step of the conventional schooling “path.” As Jack approached kindergarten age, we both realized that we wanted something else for him. I was already aware of OC, and I think that was what opened us to the idea of homeschooling. I’m not sure we would have been brave enough to take the leap without having the support of such a wonderful community!

What are some of the key benefits to this educational approach with your family?

For us, one of the biggest pluses is flexibility. Being able to take long weekends to visit family or go travel to a regatta (we’re big sailors!) is huge. Or, last year, with all the snow we had—we were able to shuffle our days around and spend tons of time outside. Another huge plus is being able to meet each of our sons where they’re at. For example, when one struggles with a concept we can take extra time, play lots of related games, and then move on when he’s ready. Or alternatively, if he’s clearly mastered something and getting bored, he can skip ahead a bit. Finally, maybe the biggest plus of all is time together. Jack and Owen will only be young once, and there’s no guarantee that we’ll be able to continue to homeschool indefinitely. So these days, truly, are precious.

What concerns or challenges have you experienced along the way? How have you addressed them? Do you have any concerns as you look ahead?

For me, the biggest challenge as a home educator has been to just relax a bit, trust the process and the boys, and trust the idea that they don’t need to know everything about everything. I’m still somewhat stuck in the “traditional schooling” mentality—it’s amazing how deeply rooted it is, even though we know it’s not what’s best for Jack and Owen. So my challenge continues to be to relax into it, to let go of the rigid ideas of what they “should” or “need” to know, and be more open to veering off the curriculum, following their lead, and trusting that it will lead to something fruitful. Because it always does.

What resources—people, books, curricula, places or organizations (museums, art centers, scouting, 4-H, businesses, etc.)—have you found helpful? How have they contributed to your youth’s development?

I have such a love-hate relationship with social media, but honestly Facebook is such a great resource for homeschoolers.

Joining FB groups of like-minded homeschooling families has been enormously helpful, as has joining FB groups for local homeschoolers—we’ve made so many great connections and discovered many wonderful local resources and events. OC too, of course, is an amazing resource. Just being able to connect with parents who’ve been doing this whole homeschooling thing for years longer than we have is priceless.

Other resources we use include formal curricula for reading and math. And books. Lots of books. So. Many. Books. Our house is mostly just books strewn everywhere. Many of them are mine! There are many authors whose work I’ve found incredibly valuable as we embark on this homeschooling (and parenting) journey. Some favorites include Julie Bogart, Peter Gray, Alfie Kohn, and Dan Siegel. And, while we’re a pretty screen-minimal family we have come to embrace the utility of apps like YouTube for facilitating diving into rabbit holes. This was particularly helpful during the pandemic lockdown months, when we also splurged on lots of subscription kits (Science! Cooking! Snacks from around the world!).

How do your young people spend their time when they’re not at OC?

After an early morning snuggle on the sofa, our mornings are generally dedicated to our curricula topics, mainly reading and math—we aim to get through a few lessons a week of each as we feel strongly that they have an excellent foundation in the basics. We do a lot of reading aloud—this year we’re loosely focusing on world geography, so we’re reading about different cultures, reading stories and folktales from around the world, things like that. We like to keep our afternoons pretty open, allowing for adventures and field trips of all kinds! Nature walks, museum trips, library visits, playdates with friends, baking, and so on. Another bonus of having afternoons generally open is that it allows for plenty of unstructured time, giving Jack and Owen opportunities to dig into areas of interest. Right now

Jack is super into rocks, reading about rocks, figuring out where to find cool rocks, and rock tumbling. Owen spends most of his free time building with legos, looking at books, and riding his bike in the driveway (Jack taught him to ride a two-wheeler this fall!).

From your young people’s perspectives, what are the main pluses of this type of education?

JACK: That I don’t have to go to school all day, and that homeschooling is so flexible. I like being able to choose how I spend my time (well, mostly). It’s also nice to be able to do things during the week, like go for a hike in the woods or have a playdate with friends, instead of having to wait for the weekend to do it all.

OWEN: I wouldn’t want to not go to OC, knowing it and knowing how great it is! If I went to regular school we couldn’t go to OC. I like being able to be outside a LOT.

What would you tell other families about how to get the most out of their OC experience?

Say “yes” to as much as you can! Go to the community events, stay after programs to let your young people play while you chat with other parents. Ask questions. The OC community represents decades of homeschooling experience, and people are always happy to answer questions. No matter what you’re struggling with or wondering about, someone has been through it and will be happy to lend some insight.

How would you describe OC to friends and family?

OC is pretty magical. It’s a place where our young people can be themselves, pursuing their interests and directing their own education, and not just be told what to do and when to do it. The campus is beyond beautiful, and the youth get to spend heaps of time outdoors. Best of all, they get to do it with a group of amazing peers and facilitators! OC makes homeschooling possible for our family, and we are so grateful to have it in our lives. ☺

Ask OC!

You ask, you answer

How do you avoid being overwhelmed? Feeling like you have “too much on your plate” between scheduling activities, juggling young people’s educational/life needs, and the rest of family life? How do you create balance?

I love this question! I think a huge perk of this educational lifestyle is flexibility and I’m working on embracing that to the fullest. I’ve made the conscious decision to scale our learning plans up and down from day to day or week to week depending on what’s happening in our family life. If I have an exceptionally busy work week, our homeschooling looks very different than a week where I’m present and available to guide or lead activities. Knowing that there is an ebb and flow to it all and being okay with that has made all the difference for me. That, and power napping—it’s the BEST.

– Jacey (current OC parent)

I put EVERYTHING on our Google calendar to make sure there’s actually time. If I get to the point where something has to give, I let something give. I look at the calendar and I say, what can go? Taking 5 minutes to really examine the calendar can give me back hours of time when I’m over-committed.

– Rebecca May (current OC parent)

As a homeschooling parent I find myself taking a step back now and again to find balance in exposure. As homeschoolers I think at times we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to expose our young people to as many ideas and opportunities as possible. It’s an amazing world out there so it’s hard not to get overzealous! However, I think sometimes, too much choice can be overwhelming and nudge things a bit off kilter. There were times when I was introduced to so many events, classes, workshops, field trips and meet-ups, that my head would spin. I didn’t want my kids to miss out. I felt like I needed to share it all with them so they could have a full plate to choose from. What if I left out one of those opportunities that one day they would excel at? Not to mention, “That would look great in their portfolio!” I was feeling overwhelmed and I can guarantee my youth were feeling it too. I wanted more balance and over time I began to just, well, trust. Trust that they would learn new things and find interests and passions on their own, without constant exposure. And guess what? They did! They both continue to amaze me with their many interests and talents in all sorts of things, many of which I had nothing to do with! Now, that’s not to say that I

Choosing the path less traveled is not always an easy, nor straightforward, journey. The good news is that you are not alone! Part of what makes Open Connections so wonderful is that a supportive, knowledgeable, and encouraging community is built-in. We know that there are questions that arise as you and your family continue in your educational endeavors. Use this column as a way to crowdsource some answers and to get inspiration. Have a question that you’d like to see answered here? Send your questions to askoc@openconnections.org

For next issue, we would love to hear your answers to the following question: “How do OC families handle screen time and/or video games?”

Please feel free to respond to this question via email to askoc@openconnections.org and look out for other questions to be posted to social media as well!

don’t continue to share ideas and opportunities with my youth, they will be the first to tell you that I definitely still do my fair share of that, but finding that balance between exposure and trust has proven to serve us all well.

– Amy (current OC parent and OC alumni parent)

For us, overwhelm is closely tied to expectations, so we try to be gentle about what we expect from ourselves and each other. There are all the things that we would love to do in a day, and then there is what is realistic. We often aim for a little less, and embrace flexibility if things don’t get done. One practical tool that I like is the Five Minute Journal. It helps you focus on three priorities for each day and there is a gratitude practice built in at bedtime. (There is a young people’s version too!)

– Alana (current OC parent)

I am working on recognizing that my enthusiasm for all of the things does not miraculously create time in the day for all of the things. When I notice my young people feeling crabby at transition moments, (“Time to go! Where are your shoes?”) I know that I have probably “yes’d” us into a corner. In talking with other parents about this hole I sometimes dig, the idea of balance comes up a lot. I’m here to make a pitch for imbalance. A little of this and a little of that (not too much) is definitely less stressful, but sometimes going passionately full tilt is the best path to joy and flow and growth. My challenge, then, is how to make room for whole days dedicated to just one glorious thing? Shove everything else to the side and jump in with both feet! This is my answer to overwhelm: not a little of everything, but a lot of one thing at a time. Please remind me of this in February.

– Michelle (current OC parent)

I have been developing a meditation practice over the past 20 years that has really helped me to find grounding in uncertain and stressful times, and provides a pathway to connect with and amplify my joy. Embracing the freedom to make this practice work for me has been essential. When I started, it was just another context for self-criticism and doubt: I wasn’t doing it “right,” it wasn’t “working” for me. Once I let go of the idea that I had to do it a certain way, a whole new world opened to me, and now I decide what I need each day: sit or lie down? Chair, floor or bed? Guided, music or silence? And even on the days when my brain is so full that the 15 minutes pass and I don’t hear a word of the meditation, I know that it is beneficial and I feel better?”

– Linda (current OC parent) ©



Development



Dear Open Connections Friends and Family,

Honoring our roots. Creating Connections.
Growing with intention.

These past few months, as I have been settling in here, have allowed me to have a mindful period to look back on the roots of this wonderful organization. Open Connections is truly grounded in the strong community and commitment to the belief in natural and lifelong learning.

By honoring our roots, we are looking forward to creating meaningful connections. This year our goals are: Strengthening connections within our existing community, building relationships with our friends and neighbors, and exploring how Open Connections can be a meaningful partner for more families as we intentionally grow our community.

Our hope is to strengthen our local network of resources and simultaneously increase the reach and impact of Open Connections, while we continue to honor our storied roots. By staying committed to our mission of empowering lifelong learners to lead lives full of purpose and fulfillment, we will continue to provide our community with a warm and inviting environment that is conducive to all kinds of growth: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and impersonal.

We invite you to donate to our campaign of Creating Connections in any way that you are comfortable!

Make a financial contribution:

- One time
- Sustaining

Spread the word:

- Use the hashtag #CreatingConnections on social media
- Tell your friends and family about Open Connections!
- Suggest local organizations that might like to partner with us in any way, let me know sarah.becker@openconnections.org

Stop by and say hello:

- Drop us a line and let us know you’d like to visit! Every moment that you spend on campus is meaningful to us, and we are so grateful that you have chosen to be part of our community!

I am very much looking forward to seeing where Open Connections grows, and I am thankful to be here alongside all of you through this exciting year of Creating Connections and beyond.

With continued excitement and much appreciation,

Sarah Becker and the Development Committee

ALUMNI PROFILE

Pie Falteich

What led you/your family to OC?

My parents were already interested in the idea of unschooling/homeschooling and we had extended family who were already involved with Open Connections. Once it came time to start my education and my parents had seen the campus and met everyone involved, it was an easy choice.

At what age did you start at OC? What programs were you involved in?

I started at four years old. And I was in every program from Open Program to Shaping Your Life.

What have you been up to since leaving/graduating from OC?

After I graduated from OC, I continued working at a private country club where I had started caddying when I was 13. After I saved enough money, I took a month-long trip with one of my best friends to Europe where we lived out of backpacks and stayed with friends-of-friends and in hostels. After I got back, I took a management job at that same country club. I later left the country club for a warehouse manager position at a veterinary supply company and simultaneously started my own auto detailing business on the side. Along the way I have been taking community college classes online. In the future, I'm looking to go into the military, law enforcement or both.

How did OC impact you? What did you find useful?

The numerous ways that OC has impacted me and has continued to guide me through life after graduation, would probably be far too long to fit into a single OC Magazine. But generally, I think that the teamwork and problem-solving emphasis have assisted me greatly in my professional life. Learning to do presentations (Peer Facilitations and Symposium) and getting exposure to researching, creating, and presenting to an audience has helped me feel comfortable around groups of people.

How did OC hone your Self-Understanding?

The thing is, I essentially grew up at OC. It helped me hone my self-understanding in so many ways. I learned what kind of people I like to fill my time with, what I like to do, and how I like to feel and not feel about myself.

How did OC help you grow your Effective Communication skills?

I pride myself in being a good communicator. I like talking to people and hearing what they have to say. I think the interpersonal interaction I got at OC is second to none. Getting to meet people from all different walks of life was important and I feel that I learned how to not just talk, but to truly communicate.



How did OC help you develop your Creative/ Implementation Skills?

In group projects you need to figure out a strategy and get the team working together to implement that strategy. In symposiums/presentations you need to come up with ideas and a vision of how things will look and sound, and then implement that. I think OC greatly helped me with implementation skills by making me aware of how to set a goal and implement changes to achieve those. As far as creativity, OC says the “freedom to learn and create.” I think that is the perfect way to describe my experience. With the freedom to honestly create anything you were curious about, I was able to learn more about what I am actually interested in.

If you had not gone to OC, imagine how you might be different?

I may have never met the friends I have now, I wouldn't have had facilitators who helped influence me in positive ways throughout my education, and I wouldn't have had the freedom in my education and the opportunity to use my imagination to get involved with things that interest me. Also, I don't think I'd have developed the ability to find out who I am and what drives me at a young age.

What favorite memory of OC would you like to share?

My graduation. Not only did it bring a great feeling of pride and achievement to my family and myself, but my dad had not been to many OC functions. After my graduation, he said that not only was it the best graduation he had ever seen, but it solidified the decision to send me to OC and he believed that they had made the right choice. ©



