

SIX LEVERS OF CONNECTION

CREATING CONNECTED COMMUNITIES





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Introduction

Across the country, communities are experiencing rising levels of loneliness, disconnection, and division. These challenges affect health, well-being, trust, and people's ability to work together to solve problems. Research continues to demonstrate that meaningful social connection is essential for healthier individuals, stronger families, more resilient organizations, and thriving communities.

The YMCA's 10-year bold, shared vision of **Creating Connected Communities (CCC)** is not a new program or short-term campaign. It's a Movement-wide focus that helps Ys create more intentional experiences where people can achieve goals, build relationships, feel a sense of belonging, and contribute to something larger than themselves.

The Six Levers of Connection provide a practical approach for strengthening connection and contribution across the Y and within communities.

Built on evidence, implementation science, and human-centered design, the levers help guide changes to practices, policies, programs, environments, and relationships that support lasting connection and shared action.

Rather than a standalone initiative, the Six Levers of Connection represent interconnected ways of working that help make connection a visible and intentional outcome. Together, they offer strategies for creating environments where people feel welcomed, supported, valued, and empowered to contribute. They can be applied within YMCA operations, through community partnerships, and in individual interactions to strengthen both personal and collective well-being.

This toolkit brings the levers together in a single resource to support learning, reflection, planning, and action.

While each lever can be explored independently, they are most powerful when used together. The levers reinforce one another, creating a comprehensive approach to strengthening connection and contribution at every level—from individual interactions to organizational culture to community-wide change.

As you explore this toolkit, consider where connection is already thriving, where barriers may exist, and what opportunities are available to strengthen experiences that result in achievement, relationships, belonging, connection, and contribution. Small, intentional changes can create meaningful impacts over time. By working across all six levers, Ys can help build communities where people feel connected, valued, empowered, and able to thrive together.





The Six Levers of Connection



Elevate Connection

Use shared language and stories to strengthen purpose and connection.



Practice Connection Skills

Develop the skills and reinforce the culture that make meaningful connection possible.



Embed Connection Everywhere

Design and deliver experiences that create connection.



Create Connected Spaces

Build physical and digital environments that spark interaction and create access and belonging for all.



Invite Contribution

Provide opportunities for people to share their time, talents, and voices to create change.



Support Well-Being

Foster experiences that elevate health and well-being and help all people thrive.



Setting the Foundation

Some foundational conditions, mindsets, skills, and structures will help Ys build upon work they are already doing and make the Six Levers of Connection successful and sustainable.

While focusing on the levers, Ys will need to consider how the following can accelerate their ability to foster connection and contribution to thrive.

- **Strengthen organizational readiness for change:** At the heart of our vision is a simple belief: stronger Ys help create stronger, more connected communities. Organizational excellence empowers Ys to deliver meaningful experiences where people achieve goals, build relationships, feel a sense of belonging, and contribute to something larger than themselves. Excellence assessments are tools to help Ys support and strengthen their work to create connection. Consider how your Y's excellence assessment might point you to opportunities to create connection.
- **Establish measurement and learning practices:** In advance, identify your Y's approach to tracking outcomes related to achievement, relationships, belonging, connection, and contribution. Consider how you'll use data to demonstrate impact and for learning and quality improvement. Explore the Measurement and Evaluation section of this toolkit for additional considerations and next steps.
- **Center community voice and lived experience:** Start with the experiences, aspirations, and needs of members, staff, volunteers, residents, and partners. Use listening, reflection, and human-centered design approaches to ensure solutions are shaped with the people they are intended to serve, leading to more relevant, trusted, and effective approaches.
- **Expand and deepen partnerships:** Strengthening connection requires contributions from many stakeholders. Develop relationships with schools, health systems, housing organizations, employers, faith communities, local government, community-based organizations, and with residents to identify common goals and opportunities for collaboration. Shared ownership increases sustainability and impact. Explore the Strengthening Belonging toolkit to expand and deepen your Y's partnerships.
- **Communicate and lead people through change:** Creating a shared understanding of why connection matters means establishing a common language, purpose, and commitment around connection and contribution, ensuring staff, volunteers, leaders, and partners are aligned before implementation begins. It also means building the skills required to do the work well and creating the space to help people adapt to change. Consider how your Y will assess current conditions, identify priorities, select strategies, and measure progress in a consistent and transparent way.



ELEVATE CONNECTION

Use shared language and stories to strengthen purpose and connection.

- **In Your Organization:** Support staff and volunteers in building shared language and purpose.
- **In Your Community:** Partner with communities to co-create narratives and amplify the social connection imperative together.



Elevate Connection

What This Means

Elevate Connection helps explain why connection and contribution matter and why strengthening these should be a shared priority. It is about building awareness and support among staff, volunteers, partners, and community members.

It helps them recognize both the challenge of social isolation and the opportunity to strengthen relationships in their communities. It also positions the Y as a trusted voice that can highlight the importance of social connection for everyone.

Through messaging, campaigns, and community engagement, this work shifts the narrative from blaming individuals toward a shared sense of responsibility and possibility for creating stronger connections.

In Your Organization and Community

Though local context and relationships will influence how this looks in different YMCAs and communities, the following considerations and approaches can help guide the process.

Start with People's Experiences and Aspirations to Build Shared Understanding

Conversations about connection resonate most when they begin with people's lived experiences. Create structured opportunities for reflection and discussion.

- **In Your Organization:** Host conversations with staff, volunteers, or board members about why social connection matters and how it connects to the Y's mission.
- **In Your Community:** Convene meetings and facilitate discussions with community partners, residents, or local leaders about isolation, connection, and what people are experiencing locally.

Use Stories Combined with Data to Make Connection Visible

Stories help people feel the impact of connection and contribution. Data helps people understand the scale and urgency of the issue. Together, they create a compelling case.

- **In Your Organization:** Share member, staff, or volunteer stories in newsletters, internal communications, staff meetings, or branch events. Present research or local data on loneliness, isolation, and connection to leadership teams, staff, or volunteers.
- **In Your Community:** Highlight stories from residents, partners, or community initiatives through social media, local media, community events, or partner communications. Share community-level data with partners, funders, public leaders, or coalitions to help build a shared case for action.



Elevate Connection

Let Stakeholders Shape the “Why”

When people help shape the narrative, they are more likely to feel ownership and commitment.

Engage contributors in helping to define why connection matters in your community.

- **In Your Organization:** Invite staff, volunteers, and members to reflect on why connection and contribution matter in their daily work and what role the Y can play.
- **In Your Community:** Create space for residents, partners, and community groups to help define why connection and contribution matter locally and what shared priorities are emerging.

Highlight What Is Already Working

Ys and communities are already strengthening connection in powerful ways. Sharing examples can help others see what is possible and inspire ideas. Recognizing and amplifying these efforts helps build momentum.

- **In Your Organization:** Find opportunities to highlight programs, staff practices, or branch efforts that naturally build relationships, and help people feel welcomed and connected and improve feelings of achievement and belonging.
- **In Your Community:** Share examples of community programs, neighborhood efforts, or cross-sector partnerships that are already helping people connect and contribute.

Foster Collective Ownership and Build Momentum Through Communication and Partnership

Strengthening connection is not the responsibility of one program or department. It results from the collective efforts of staff, volunteers, members, partners, and community leaders. When people see connection as a shared responsibility, new opportunities for collaboration begin to emerge.

- **In Your Organization:** Use staff meetings, member communications, staff and volunteer orientation, and internal messaging to reinforce connection as a shared priority.
- **In Your Community:** Invite partners to explore how strengthening connection supports shared goals. Use joint messaging, events, or campaigns to build broader awareness.





Elevate Connection

Moving Into Action Together

These prompts are designed to help you engage others in conversation, strengthen alignment, and begin shaping a shared sense of purpose.

These prompts can help you explore why strengthening connection matters and the role your YMCA can play in moving this work forward.

The goal is not to reach immediate agreement, but to build a shared understanding of how connection shows up in your community and the will to act together.

- Where do we already see connection working at its best across our teams, members, and partnerships? What makes those spaces successful?
- Where do we notice people feeling disconnected, left out, or isolated, and who might be experiencing this most?
- What existing strengths, assets, or partnerships can we build from together to create momentum?
- Why does strengthening connection and contribution matter right now in our community? What becomes possible if we act, and what is at stake if we don't?

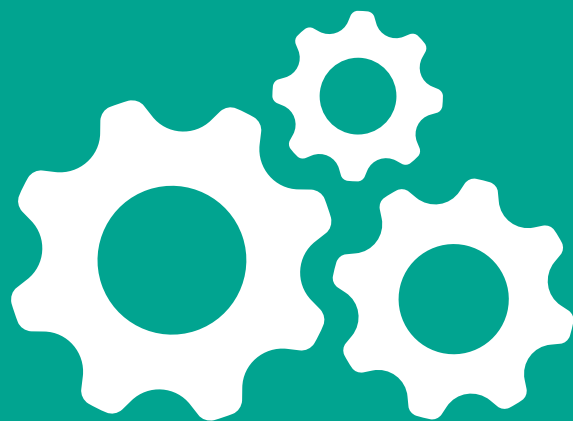
These prompts can help you engage community voice and create a space for connection, reflection, and shared meaning. The goals for these conversations are to listen, learn, and explore what connection means in people's lived experiences.

- When do you feel a sense of belonging?
- When has it been hard to feel connected or included?
- What do you wish was different about connection in your community?
- What could help bring people together in ways that feel meaningful?

Summary

Elevating Connection is not a one-time effort. It is an ongoing practice that keeps connection at the center of how organizations and communities work together. As awareness increases and collaborations strengthen, innovative approaches and actionable opportunities emerge.

For more information and to support your Y's efforts to strengthen connection and contribution, [visit Link to explore the Six Levers of Connection](#) and associated resources or submit a [Service Delivery Support Request](#).



PRACTICE CONNECTION

Develop the skills and reinforce the culture that make meaningful connection possible.

- **In Yourself:** Establish a strong foundation of self-awareness and care for others.
- **In Your Organization:** Develop staff and volunteers through shared skills and practices that strengthen relationships, teamwork, and trust.
- **In Your Community:** Use connection-centered skills to build trust, bridge differences, foster collaboration, and strengthen community relationships.



Practice Connection

What This Means

Practicing Connection Skills is about building the individual and collective capacity to create meaningful connection in everyday interactions.

This lever focuses on the learnable skills, behaviors, and practices that help people build trust, strengthen relationships, work across differences, and foster belonging. These skills shape how staff, volunteers, and leaders can turn routine moments into opportunities for connection and belonging.

It begins with how each person shows up—with awareness, listening, presence, empathy, and care, and grows through consistent practice, coaching, observation, reinforcement, and application over time.

Connection skills are not limited to a one-time training nor do they require a separate initiative. They are part of how the Y delivers on its purpose and mission every day. These skills show up in staff interactions, volunteer engagement, member experience, leadership practices, team culture, program delivery, partnerships, and community work.

In Yourself, Your Organization, and Your Community

Though local context and relationships will influence how this looks in different YMCAs and communities, the following skill areas can help guide learning, practice, and implementation.

Nurture Self-Awareness and Interpersonal Connection Skills

Trainings to consider:

- [Emotional Intelligence \(offered by Center for Creative Leadership\)](#)
- [Foundations of Self-Awareness](#)
- [Executive Director Institute \(EDI\)](#)
- [Foundations of Listen First](#)
- [Introduction to Listen First](#)
- [I Hear You: Service with CARE](#)

Build Awareness

Awareness is foundational to connection. Staff, volunteers, and leaders strengthen connections when they notice how they are showing up, how others may be experiencing a situation, and what is happening in the environment around them.

- **In Yourself:** Practice noticing your own reactions, assumptions, emotions, and patterns. Pay attention to what helps you stay grounded, open, and present with others.
- **In Your Organization:** Create routines that help teams pause, reflect, check in, and learn together. Use meetings, supervision, coaching, and debriefs to strengthen self-awareness, team awareness, and a shared responsibility for connection.
- **In Your Community:** Enter community spaces with humility and curiosity. Notice who is present, who may be missing, what dynamics are shaping participation, and what may help build trust over time.



Practice Connection

Listen with Presence and Curiosity

Listening is one of the most powerful connection skills. It's more than hearing words—it's the practice of being fully present with another person, listening with openness, curiosity, and care. When people feel heard and understood, trust grows, relationships deepen, and connection becomes possible. Listening creates a foundation for empathy, communication, belonging, collaboration, and resilience.

- **In Yourself:** Practice listening to understand rather than respond. Notice how fully you are present in conversations, seek to understand different perspectives, and pay attention to what others communicate through their words and actions.
- **In Your Organization:** Create a culture where listening is valued and practiced. Encourage curiosity, invite new perspectives, and build opportunities for staff, volunteers, and members to share their experiences, ideas, and feedback. Use listening as a tool for learning, strengthening relationships, and improving the way you work together.
- **In Your Community:** Listen to understand the strengths, experiences, aspirations, and challenges of community members and partners. Create opportunities for ongoing dialogue and ensure people see how their voices help shape decisions, relationships, and action. When communities are heard, trust grows and collaboration becomes possible.

Practice Empathy and Compassion

Empathy and compassion help people feel seen, valued, and cared for. These skills are especially important when someone feels disconnected, frustrated, excluded, overwhelmed, or uncertain.

- **In Yourself:** Practice perspective-taking. Consider what someone else may be experiencing, validate what you are hearing, and respond with care.
- **In Your Organization:** Support staff and volunteers in responding to members, participants, families, and colleagues with empathy and compassion. Reinforce behaviors that communicate dignity, respect, patience, and care.
- **In Your Community:** Approach community relationships with a commitment to understanding lived experiences. Create space for stories, perspectives, and needs that may differ from your own.



Practice Connection

Strengthen Belonging, Collaboration, and Bridgebuilding Activities

Trainings and resources to consider:

- [Facilitation Skills](#)
- [Facilitating Change in Small Groups](#)
- [Leading & Coaching Others](#)
- [Bridgebuilding at the Y](#)
- [Bridgebuilding Blueprint Assessment](#)
- [Strengthening Belonging: The Y's Approach to Community Engagement](#)
- [Collaborate with Confidence](#)
- [Innovation Process Toolkit](#)
- [Vision](#) (offered by Center for Creative Leadership)

Communicate to Build Understanding

Connection-centered communication helps people make meaning together. It includes asking thoughtful questions, sharing information clearly, facilitating dialogue, framing conversations well, and creating space for people to participate.

- **In Yourself:** Practice communicating with clarity and care. Ask open-ended questions, check for understanding, and consider how your words, tone, and nonverbal behaviors influence connection.
- **In Your Organization:** Equip staff and volunteers to communicate in ways that build trust, reduce confusion, and support belonging. Use shared language around connection so teams can describe what they are practicing and why it matters.
- **In Your Community:** Communicate in ways that invite shared understanding and ownership. Use stories, dialogue, and clear framing to help partners and community members connect around common priorities.



Practice Connection

Bridgebuilding Across Differences and Establishing Common Ground

Connection skills help people connect across difference in perspective, background, role, experience, identity, and belief. Bridgebuilding helps people recognize both the differences they bring and the common ground they share. Bridgebuilding does not mean avoiding hard conversation; it means creating conditions where people can engage with curiosity, respect, and care.

- **In Yourself:** Practice noticing assumptions, seeking different perspectives, staying open during disagreement or discomfort, and seeking common ground.
- **In Your Organization:** Create opportunities for staff, volunteers, members, and participants to build relationships across roles, departments, programs, and experiences. Support teams in working through differences with curiosity and respect.
- **In Your Community:** Build relationships with people and groups not already connected to the Y. Create spaces for dialogue, shared learning, and collaboration across different experiences and perspectives.

Collaborate and Co-Create

Connection grows when people have opportunities to contribute, shape decisions, and work together toward shared goals. Collaboration and co-creation help move connection from individual relationships to shared action.

- **In Yourself:** Practice inviting others into problem-solving. Ask who needs to be included, what perspectives are missing, and how others can contribute meaningfully.
- **In Your Organization:** Foster team environments where people feel comfortable sharing ideas, raising concerns, learning together, and contributing to solutions. Build psychological safety through inclusive facilitation, shared decision-making, and clear follow-through.
- **In Your Community:** Work with partners and community members to identify shared priorities, design solutions together, and align around common goals. Strengthen collaboration by building trust before action and maintaining relationships beyond a single project or community event.



Practice Connection

Create Welcoming Spaces and Foster Belonging

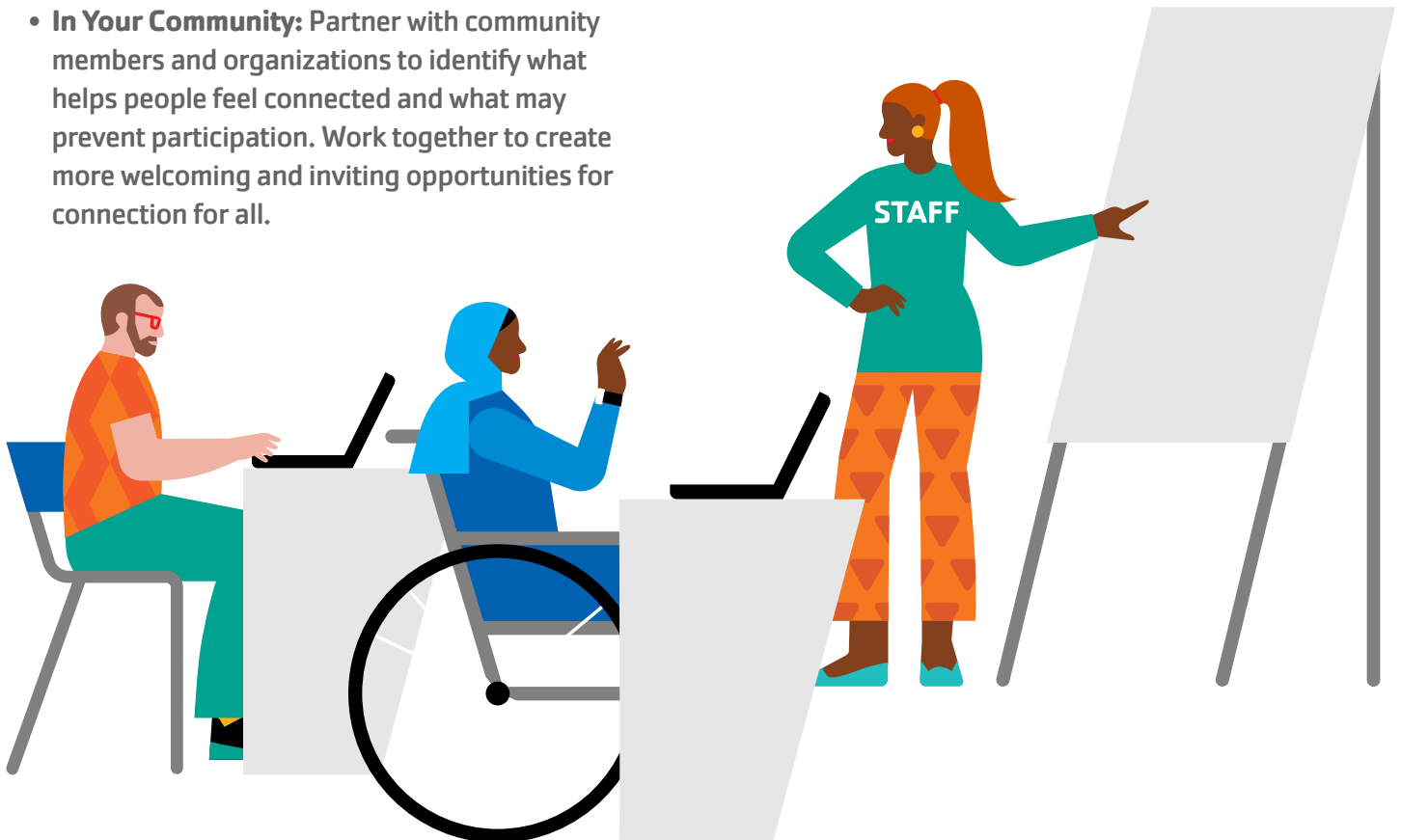
Belonging is created through repeated experiences of being welcomed, known, respected, included, and able to contribute. Connection skills help staff and volunteers notice barriers and create more inclusive experiences.

- **In Yourself:** Practice noticing who is included, who may be on the margins, and what you can do to help people feel welcome and valued.
- **In Your Organization:** Strengthen everyday practices that help people feel they belong – greeting people by name, creating inclusive program environments, removing barriers to participation, and inviting contributions.
- **In Your Community:** Partner with community members and organizations to identify what helps people feel connected and what may prevent participation. Work together to create more welcoming and inviting opportunities for connection for all.

Build the Capacity to Repair Relationships and Rebuild Trust

Trainings to consider:

- [Leading People](#)
- [Leading & Coaching Others](#)
- [Communicate to De-Escalate: Workshop for Frontline Workers \(offered by The National Conflict Resolution Center\)](#)
- [The Exchange \(offered by The National Conflict Resolution Center\)](#)





Practice Connection

Repair Harm and Rebuild Trust

Connection work recognizes that relationships are not always easy. Misunderstandings, conflict, disappointment, and moments of disconnection are a natural part of working, living, and partnering with others. Repair is essential when relationships are strained or when people have experienced disconnection, exclusion, or harm.

- **In Yourself:** Practice reflecting on your impact, not only your intent. When needed, acknowledge mistakes, apologize with care, and take next steps to repair trust.
- **In Your Organization:** Create norms and practices that help teams address tension early and constructively. Support leaders, staff, and volunteers in having honest conversations, taking responsibility, and learning through conflict.
- **In Your Community:** Approach partnership challenges with transparency, accountability, and care. When trust has been strained, focus on listening, repair, follow-through, and rebuilding relationships over time.

Strengthen Resilience and Stay Engaged

Practicing connection-centered skills requires resilience. Building connection can be rewarding, but it can also involve discomfort, tension, ambiguity, and sustained effort. Staff, volunteers, and leaders need practices that help them stay grounded and engaged.

- **In Yourself:** Practice strategies that help you pause, reset, regulate, and return to connection when interactions are challenging.
- **In Your Organization:** Build team routines that support reflection, recovery, learning, and mutual support. Reinforce connection practices consistently, not only during moments of challenge.
- **In Your Community:** Stay committed to relationship-building over time. Recognize that trust, collaboration, and shared action often grow through repeated interactions and sustained presence.



Practice Connection

Moving Into Action Together

These prompts are designed to help individuals and teams reflect on how connection skills show up today and where there may be opportunities to strengthen practice.

In Yourself: These prompts can help you explore your own thoughts, feelings, and actions.

- How do I typically show up when I am under pressure, uncertain, or in disagreement with others?
- What helps me stay grounded, present, and open in challenging interactions?
- How well do I listen before responding or trying to solve a problem?
- When do I find it easiest to express empathy and care? When is it more difficult?
- What assumptions might I need to notice or examine?
- How do I repair trust when I miss the mark?
- Which connection skills do I want to practice more intentionally right now?

In Your Organization: These prompts can help you explore the practices within your Y.

- Where do staff and volunteers already demonstrate strong connection-centered skills?
- Which skills are most important for strengthening the experiences of staff, members, and volunteers and ensuring program quality?
- How are these skills currently taught, practiced, coached, observed, and reinforced?
- Where do we see opportunities to build stronger listening, empathy, communication, belonging, collaboration, and repair practices?
- How can supervisors and leaders model these skills more consistently?
- What existing trainings, leadership programs, or staff development experiences already support this work?
- What is one skill our team could practice together over the next several weeks?



Practice Connection

In Your Community: These prompts can help you apply these skills to the work your Y does in the community.

- Where are trust and relationships already strong in the community?
- Where might stronger listening, bridging, collaboration, or repair be needed?
- Who are we already connected to, and who might we need to build relationships with?
- How are community members and partners invited to share their experiences, priorities, and aspirations?
- How can the Y show up as a trusted convener, listener, partner, and collaborator?
- What connection skills would strengthen our partnerships and shared work?
- What is one relationship or partnership where we could practice these skills more intentionally?



Summary

Practicing Connection Skills is not a one-time training. It is an ongoing practice and commitment to how people show up with themselves, with one another, and with the community. By building these skills over time—learning them, practicing them, coaching them, observing them, reinforcing them, and embedding them—the Y strengthens its capacity to help people feel seen, valued, connected, and able to contribute.

For more information and to support your Y's efforts to practice connection skills, [visit Link to explore the Six Levers of Connection](#) and associated resources or submit a [Service Delivery Support Request](#).



EMBED CONNECTION

Design and deliver experiences that create connection.

- **In Your Organization:** Embed intentional connection moments in programs, practices, and policies through co-design based on participant perspectives and leadership.



Embed Connection

What This Means

Embed Connection Everywhere is about designing the Y experience so connection is a clear, visible, and valued outcome of what we do. This means each program, activity, practice, and policy becomes both the specific service being delivered and an opportunity to help people build relationships, participate meaningfully, and be part of something larger than themselves.

Doing this well requires designing and improving programs, operational practices, and policies so connection is built in by default, barriers to entry and ongoing participation are reduced, and people are more likely to return often enough for trust and relationships to grow over time.

This may include intentional connection moments, shared experiences, participant voice, and redefining success so relational outcomes matter alongside traditional metrics. When connection is embedded in this manner, it becomes a more consistent and meaningful part of the Y experience, both within our walls and in partnership with the broader community.

In Your Organization and Community

Though local context and relationships will influence how best to embed connection in different YMCAs and communities, the following considerations and approaches can help guide the process.

Reframe Outcomes so Connection Is a Visible and Valued Result

This begins by treating connection as a marker of success, alongside attendance, skill-building, or health improvements. When achievement, relationships, and belonging are identified as outcomes worth observing and tracking, teams may begin to design and lead differently.

- **In Your Organization:** Work with staff and program leaders to name connection as a program goal and to help them reflect on whether people are building relationships and returning over time. Embed outcomes tied to achievement, relationships, belonging, connection, and contribution into overall program metrics.
- **In Your Community:** Embed connection into shared outcome metrics in partnership agreements.

Add Intentional Connection Moments to Existing and New Programs

Leverage program engagement to create repeated opportunities for people to interact, build trust, and support one another through shared experiences.

- **In Your Organization:** During program sessions, incorporate introductions and icebreakers, partner activities, small-group interaction, and shared reflection.
- **In Your Community:** Support programs delivered in schools, housing sites, faith communities, or neighborhood spaces that create opportunities for people to interact and build relationships.



Embed Connection

Find Opportunities to Engage Participant Voice, Leadership, and Co-Creation

Connection grows when people are invited not only to join but also to help shape the experience. Designing with lived experience in mind can strengthen ownership and make programs more meaningful and responsive to participant needs.

- **In Your Organization:** Invite staff, members, volunteers, and program participants to shape program activities, offer feedback, take on leadership roles, and facilitate connection activities.
- **In Your Community:** Invite community members and partners to help shape collaborative activities, events, or other shared efforts so they reflect lived experience, local strengths, and community priorities and support the ways people find meaning in connection with others.

Design for Consistency, Repetition, and Shared Purpose

Trust and relationships deepen over time. Focus on opportunities for programs, practices, and group experiences to allow for repeated exposure and for people to participate, return, and continue connecting around something meaningful together.

- **In Your Organization:** Design programs and group and volunteer experiences that allow people to return often enough to build trust, familiarity, and stronger relationships over time.
- **In Your Community:** Engage in ongoing partner-based activities that bring people together regularly around shared goals or community priorities, such as community gardens, music series, park and neighborhood cleanups, community walkability efforts, and block parties.

Remove Barriers and Shape a More Welcoming Experience

Connection is harder to build when people face barriers to participation. Focus on practices and policies that make it easier for people to access, connect to, and stay engaged in Y experiences.

- **In Your Organization:** Review schedules, registration, fees, language availability, accessibility, locations, signage, promotion, staffing, and other practices to make participation easier and more welcoming.
- **In Your Community:** Work with partners to foster experiences that are easier for people to access and stay engaged in and to reduce barriers in community-based settings (e.g., transportation, childcare).

Extend Connection-Centered Work Beyond the Y Through Programs, Partnerships, and Shared Action

The work is not limited to what happens inside the walls of the Y. It also includes delivering programs in community spaces, strengthening the work of partners, and contributing to broader conditions that facilitate relationship growth where people live, learn, work, and gather.

- **In Your Organization:** Consider how programs and practices can be adapted in ways that support connection both within and outside Y walls.
- **In Your Community:** Deliver programs in partners' spaces and help partners strengthen their own connection-building efforts.



Embed Connection

Moving Into Action Together

Use these prompts to help your Y explore how to embed connection more intentionally in programs, practices, and policies. The goal is to design with people, not for them—learning from lived experience, shaping ideas together, and testing small changes over time.

- **Start with people:** begin with the experiences of the people you are hoping to engage. Ask and listen for what matters to them, what they are experiencing now, and what they want more of.
 - How can we learn and design with the people we currently engage or hope to engage?
 - What processes can we put in place to help support co-creation?
- **Ask what helps or hinders:** determine what in the current experience supports connection and what may create distance, frustration, or barriers.
 - What in this experience helps people feel welcomed, connected, and likely to return?
- **Build on what is working:** before starting over, identify where connection is already happening and what strengths you can build on.
 - Where do we already see connection happening in meaningful ways?
 - What can we replicate?
 - What can we build on?
- **Start small and learn:** choose one practical change to test, then learn from what happens and adjust over time.
 - What is one small change we can try to strengthen connection?
 - How will we learn from what happens?

Summary

Embed Connection Everywhere is ongoing work. Small shifts in how experiences are designed, how participation is supported, how connections are made, and how relationships are cultivated can make a meaningful difference over time. As you continue this work, consider where connection is already happening, where it may be getting left to chance, and what small changes could help make belonging, trust, and participation a more consistent part of the Y experience.

For more information and to support your Y's efforts in embedding connection everywhere, [visit Link to explore the Six Levers of Connection](#) and associated resources or submit a [Service Delivery Support Request](#).



CREATE CONNECTED SPACES

Build physical and digital environments that spark interaction and create access and belonging for all.

- **In Your Organization:** Reimagine physical and digital environments as places that spark belonging and interaction.
- **In Your Community:** Partner to revitalize public spaces and expand digital access, removing barriers to participation.



Create Connected Spaces

What This Means

Creating Connected Spaces is about designing physical and digital environments that make connection easy and possible. It requires an understanding of how people experience a space or setting. What makes them feel at ease? What invites interaction? What encourages them to linger, return, and build relationships over time?

From lobbies, wellness floors, and program rooms to outdoor and online spaces, this work reduces access barriers so people can use spaces with comfort and dignity. When spaces are designed with empathy and intention, they do more than support programs—they help enable the conditions needed for trust, connection, and community to thrive.

In Your Organization and Community

Though local context and relationships will influence what connected spaces look like in different YMCAs and communities, the following considerations and approaches can help guide the process.

Create Spaces That Invite Interaction and Shared Experience

Spaces are more likely to facilitate connection when they make it easier for people to see one another, linger, and engage. Consider how environments can be better shaped to support conversation, shared activity, and spontaneous interaction.

- **In Your Organization:** Arrange seating to encourage conversation, flexible layouts for group activities, and gathering areas that make it easy for people to linger before or after events, meetings, or programs.
- **In Your Community:** Create outdoor gathering spaces, community rooms, and shared settings that support a variety of activities—such as games, gardening, art, or conversation—and make it easier for neighbors to gather and build relationships.

Reduce Barriers and Improve Access for All

Connection is harder to build when people cannot easily enter, navigate, or use a space. Consider accessibility, wayfinding, comfort, and other design choices to ensure all people are supported in entering and participating in a space with dignity and ease.

- **In Your Organization:** Deploy clear wayfinding, multilingual signage, and layouts to make spaces easier to enter, use, and move through. Ensure accessible entrances and pathways are available and easy to reach. Provide access to Wi-Fi and charging stations to support participation in digital engagement activities.
- **In Your Community:** Work with partners to support connection in community spaces through lighting, seating, signage, technology, transportation support, safety measures, accessibility features, and language availability.



Create Connected Spaces

Extend Connection Through Outdoor and Digital Environments

The Y experience is not limited to a building. Outdoor locations and digital environments can also be designed to support engagement and connection.

- **In Your Organization:** Use outdoor seating areas, walking paths, bulletin boards, and digital platforms to help people connect, stay informed, and engage beyond a single program or room.
- **In Your Community:** Host programs and gatherings in parks, schools, housing sites, or online spaces to extend connection beyond your YMCA facilities and make participation easier for all community members.

Shape Spaces That Support Connection Across Differences

Spaces can reinforce separation or help bridge it. Consider how environments can enable people from different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives to engage, interact, and build trust over time.

- **In Your Organization:** Shared spaces and layouts that bring together people from different backgrounds, generations, or interests and support respectful interaction.
- **In Your Community:** Community spaces designed or adapted to welcome different groups, encourage shared use, and create opportunities for dialogue and interaction across differences.

Design Spaces That Feel Welcoming and Comfortable

Focusing both on first impressions and overall experience, consider the features and design choices that help people feel invited, at ease, and encouraged to stay, like seating, lighting, layout, and warmth.

- **In Your Organization:** Entrances, lobbies, and program areas that feel warm, inviting, and easy to navigate – with comfortable seating, natural light, and elements that reflect local community identity.
- **In Your Community:** Community spaces designed similarly, and with welcoming signage, comfortable seating, shade, lighting, or other features that help people feel at ease and encourage them to stay.

Design with the People Who Use the Space

Spaces are more likely to be effective in supporting connection if they are designed with the people who will use them. Ask, listen, and engage members, staff, families, partners, and community members in your efforts to create connected spaces to reflect their lived experiences and to respond to real needs..

- **In Your Organization:** Poll members, staff, and volunteers in how best to arrange, improve, and utilize existing spaces within your YMCA to ensure environments are welcoming.
- **In Your Community:** Identify and engage individuals or organizations with expertise in human centered design to learn more about how physical environments can be built with human needs prioritized over stylistic choices. Engage residents, partners, and community members to help identify community locations for programming and events to foster a sense of share ownership.



Create Connected Spaces

Moving Into Action Together

By leading with empathy and intentional design, Ys can help create environments where connection is not just possible but expected, encouraged, and woven into everyday experience. Use these prompts to help your team explore how a given space is working today, learn from the people who use it, and identify small changes that could strengthen connection over time.

- How are people moving through this space? How are they relating to it? How does this space currently influence whether people feel comfortable, welcomed, and likely to connect? [Start here with some observation. Pay attention to what feels welcoming, what invites people to stay, and what may make connection harder.]
- What opportunities do we have to engage members, staff, volunteers, partners, or others using the space? What are these stakeholders telling us about what helps them feel at ease, included, and connected?
- What in this space helps connection happen? What may be getting in the way? [Take a close look here at what may be facilitating or hindering access, comfort, and interaction. This can include layout, signage, seating, lighting, accessibility, language, safety, technology, etc.]
- How can we embed practices around universal audits to understand how accessible and inviting our spaces are for different people?
- What other spaces can we explore—inside or outside the Y—that may offer ideas worth adapting?
- What is one small change we can try to make this space more welcoming, accessible, and connection-friendly? What can we learn from a test of this change?

Summary

Creating Connected Spaces is ongoing work. Small changes in how a space is arranged, accessed, or experienced can make a meaningful difference in whether people feel welcomed, comfortable, and ready to connect.

For more information and to support your Y's efforts to create connected spaces, [visit Link to explore the Six Levers of Connection](#) and associated resources or submit a [Service Delivery Support Request](#).



INVITE CONTRIBUTION

Provide opportunities for people to share their time, talents, and voices to create change.

- **In Your Organization:** Expand opportunities for staff and members to share their time, talents, and voices.
- **In Your Community:** Partner with communities to empower local leaders, co-create opportunities, and share ownership of change.



Invite Contribution

What This Means

Inviting Contribution is about creating clear, accessible opportunities for people to give their time, talents, and leadership in ways that matter. These pathways honor experience, dignity, reciprocity, and agency, helping individuals find purpose while strengthening community.

Doing this well requires making it easier for people to contribute to the life, service, and culture of the Y and the broader community, and creating opportunities that are visible, flexible, and varied—inclusive of small acts of engagement as well as intensive leadership and volunteer opportunities and shared ownership over time.

This work supports the Y in recognizing the strengths people already carry while developing more ways for individual and community well-being to grow. Meaningful and accessible avenues for contribution can lead to deeper connection and stronger relationships.

In Your Organization and Community

Though local context and relationships will influence what inviting contribution looks like in different YMCAs and communities, the following considerations and approaches can help guide the process.

Create Clear and Welcoming Pathways to Contribute

Meaningful contribution is more likely when people can easily see how to get involved and what roles are available. Focus on making opportunities visible, understandable, and inviting for people of different ages, backgrounds, and levels of readiness.

- **In Your Organization:** Offer volunteer, mentoring, and leadership roles that are easy to find and understand. Encourage staff to regularly invite others to opportunities to serve, lead, or help shape life at the Y.
- **In Your Community:** Invite community partners and residents to participate in defined roles on projects, events, neighborhood initiatives, or advisory groups, with clear ways to engage and contribute.

Design Opportunities That Honor Experience, Dignity, Reciprocity, and Agency

Contribution is strongest when people are not treated simply as helpers but as people with gifts, voice, and value. Focus on creating opportunities where people contribute with others, not just for others, and where mutual respect and shared ownership are embedded.

- **In Your Organization:** Engage members, participants, or staff to help shape service projects, peer support efforts, or branch activities based on their interests, strengths, and lived experience—rather than simply asking them to complete a task.
- **In Your Community:** Explore opportunities for community members and partners to contribute alongside the Y in ways that reflect mutual respect, shared ownership, and local strengths rather than one-way service.



Invite Contribution

Offer a Range of Ways to Contribute and Lead

Not everyone will contribute in the same way or at the same level. Focus on establishing a range of opportunities, from short-term acts of contribution to ongoing roles, so people can find pathways that match their interests, strengths, and availability.

- **In Your Organization:** Offer a mix of opportunities such as community service programs (e.g., Togetherhood), peer mentoring, committee roles, employee resource groups, youth service, and ongoing volunteer leadership.
- **In Your Community:** Work with partners to develop community-based opportunities that range from one-time neighborhood projects to longer-term leadership, organizing, mentoring, or shared problem-solving roles.

Support Growth Into Leadership and Shared Ownership

Contribution becomes more meaningful when people can grow into deeper roles over time. Focus on leadership pipelines, mentoring, skill-building, and other supports that help people move into greater responsibility and influence.

- **In Your Organization:** Consider staff development channels, volunteer team leads, mentoring, and youth leadership pathways such as Leaders Club or Youth and Government to support growth into deeper responsibility over time.
- **In Your Community:** Support community members, youth, and partners in co-leading initiatives, facilitating activities, serving on planning groups, or otherwise helping to guide shared efforts in community spaces.

Make Contribution Visible and Valued

People are more likely to stay engaged when they can see that what they share is valued and matters. Focus on helping contributors feel appreciated, understand the difference they are making, and see how their efforts strengthen the Y and the community.

- **In Your Organization:** Share stories and offer recognition, celebrations, and feedback loops to help people see how their efforts are making a difference in the Y and in the lives of others.
- **In Your Community:** Publicly recognize community contributors and partners and invite them to reflect on the impact of their work to celebrate them help others see what is possible, and encourage broader involvement.

Co-Create Opportunities with Community

Meaningful contribution should not be limited to the Y's internal structures. Focus on working with staff, partners, and community members to shape opportunities that reflect their articulated priorities and allow more people to co-lead solutions where they live, learn, work, and gather.

- **In Your Organization:** Engage staff, members, and volunteers in designing and shaping contribution opportunities based on what matters most in their branch, program area, or neighborhood contexts.
- **In Your Community:** Work with community members and partners to design service, leadership, or civic opportunities that reflect community needs and priorities.



Invite Contribution

Moving Into Action Together

Ensuring accessible and meaningful contribution starts with noticing where contribution is already happening, who has opportunities to step in, and where stronger pathways may be needed. This reflection is designed to help your Y assess how contribution is invited, supported, and shared across the organization and within the community. Consider the following statements and assess what is 1) firmly in place, 2) somewhat in place, 3) emerging, or 4) not yet in place.

- People can easily find ways to contribute at our Y.
- We offer different ways for people to contribute based on their interests and availability.
- Our opportunities for contribution honor people's strengths and voices.
- People who contribute can see that what they share matters.
- We create opportunities for members, community residents, and partners to help shape and lead community efforts.
- We support people in growing into deeper leadership and shared ownership over time.

Use the prompts below to reflect on identified strengths and gaps and to consider where you may want to strengthen pathways for meaningful contribution.

- What stood out during completion of this exercise?
- Where do we see strengths in how we invite, support, and value contribution today?
- Where do we see the greatest opportunity to expand or strengthen pathways for meaningful contribution?
- What activities might we explore to better understand how people want to contribute?
- What is one small shift we could try that would make it easier for people to contribute meaningfully?

Summary

Invite Contribution is ongoing work. Small shifts in how opportunities are framed, supported, and recognized can make a meaningful difference in whether people feel invited to step in and share what they bring. As you continue this work, consider where contribution is already happening, where it may be too narrow or hard to access, and what new pathways could help more people lead, belong, and make a difference.

For more information and to support your Y's efforts to create connected spaces, [visit Link to explore the Six Levers of Connection](#) and associated resources or submit a [Service Delivery Support Request](#).



SUPPORT WELL-BEING

Foster experiences that elevate health and well-being and help all people thrive.

- **In Your Organization:** Reinforce Y programs that address these conditions by intentionally weaving connection throughout.
- **In Your Community:** Partner across sectors to remove barriers, convene stakeholders, and advocate for policies that support well-being for all.



Support Well-Being

What This Means

Support Well-being recognizes that connection and contribution do not happen in isolation; they are shaped by the broader conditions that influence people's ability to connect and contribute, such as food security, access to health care, housing stability, economic opportunity, learning, and transportation. When needs are met or otherwise supported in these areas, people are better able to access services, build relationships, and offer their gifts. This lever is about supporting both the practical conditions people rely on every day and the deeper sense of belonging and shared investment that makes thriving communities possible.

Ys do this through direct services; navigation and referrals; partnerships, collaboration, and convening; and advocacy efforts that support thriving people and places. Continued focus here can help identify and address access and engagement gaps while strengthening the foundation for ongoing connection and contribution.

In Your Organization and Community

Though local context and relationships will influence what supporting well-being looks like in different YMCAs and communities, the following considerations and approaches can help guide the process.

Strengthen Direct Services in Ways That Foster Connection

YMCAs provide a host of direct services that help meet member and community needs, including childcare, food access, health and wellness programs, housing support, workforce development, financial resources, case management, and more. Consider how these services can be delivered not only to address but also to strengthen dignity, relationships, and connection—helping people feel supported, welcomed, and less alone as they anticipate or navigate challenges.

- **In Your Organization:** Ensure direct services are designed with an emphasis on helping people feel welcomed, respected, and connected to staff, volunteers, and one another.
- **In Your Community:** Engage in joint service efforts with partners to meet urgent needs in ways that reduce stigma, build trust, and create opportunities for relationships and community connection (e.g., mobile food access, housing support, health navigation, coordinated family services, etc.).



Support Well-Being

Serve as a Community Hub for Resources and Navigation

Health and social support systems are often fragmented and difficult to navigate, especially for individuals and families already experiencing stress or isolation. As a trusted community hub, the Y can help connect people to the support they need in ways that are more welcoming, coordinated, and easier to access. Focus on helping people find their way through a web of resources, relationships, and information.

- **In Your Organization:** Establish trainings and systems that enable staff and volunteers to help individual members and families navigate available resources. Facilitate referrals when possible and offer clear information and supportive guidance to connect people to food, housing, health care, mental health resources, digital engagement opportunities, or employment support.
- **In Your Community:** Explore opportunities for the Y to serve as a community hub—the trusted entry point where residents can connect to a broader network of health, social, educational, and economic supports through coordinated partnerships, community health worker engagement, referral pathways, or shared resource navigation.

Engage and Co-Design with Community

Understanding the impact of community conditions requires intentional engagement of those most affected by them. Explore opportunities to listen and learn, center the lived experiences of community members who face barriers, and work alongside the people who navigate these conditions regularly. When community members help shape the Y's role, responses are more likely to be relevant and utilized, while also building trust and strengthening connection over time.

- **In Your Organization:** Engage members, staff, and volunteers through surveys, listening sessions, or informal conversations to understand the barriers and challenges they face. Use what you learn to shape services, partnerships, and priorities.
- **In Your Community:** Partner with residents, community leaders, and other community-based organizations to co-design programs, services, or advocacy efforts and ensure they reflect community context and priorities.



Support Well-Being

Convene Partners to Strengthen Community Conditions

No single organization can do this work alone. Leverage the Y's experience as a trusted convener to bring together residents, community partners, public agencies, and other sector leaders to align efforts and improve efficiencies. Solutions most likely to yield lasting change require partnerships that both center the voices of people closest to the challenge and distribute resources and responsibilities.

- **In Your Organization:** Work with branch leaders and staff to identify common needs observed and understood among members and use that insight to shape cross-department efforts strengthen partnerships, and inform priorities.
- **In Your Community:** Identify existing or explore new opportunities to convene stakeholders in the community to reach consensus on priorities, discuss resource allocation, and establish processes for addressing issues and needs collaboratively.

Advocate for Policies, Programs, and Investments

To support well-being effectively, services that address urgent needs must be done in concert with advocacy for policies, programs, and investments that help shape the broader systems influencing health, opportunity, and connection.

- **In Your Organization:** Review data and engage staff, volunteers, and members to identify how current policies, funding, or systems may be creating hardships or limiting well-being.
- **In Your Community:** Join or lead city, county, or statewide advocacy efforts geared toward longer-term investments and policy changes supporting well-being (e.g., affordable housing, healthy food access, health care access, public transportation, digital access for all, early learning, community walkability and safety, building and cleanup of parks and public spaces, etc.)



Support Well-Being

Strengthen Belonging and Shared Agency in Community Life

Helping people feel seen, respected, and engaged in shaping the places where they live, work, and gather can cultivate a sense of belonging and build the shared capacity and desire to work toward a common future. Support that capacity by creating space for shared decision-making and civic participation, allowing for mutual commitment to emerge and grow over time.

- **In Your Organization:** Create opportunities for members, staff, and volunteers to have a voice in how the Y works through advisory roles, feedback loops, shared decision-making, and leadership pathways that build ownership and a sense of shared responsibility.
- **In Your Community:** Support residents and community partners in building the collective capacity to identify shared priorities, engage in civic processes, and help shape the policies, programs, and investments that affect their communities.





Support Well-Being

Moving Into Action Together

Support Well-Being starts with learning what people and communities navigate daily. Use these prompts to understand what is shaping well-being in your community, recognize existing assets and gaps, and identify where collective action can help strengthen the conditions people need to connect, contribute, and thrive.

- What conditions most affect whether people in this community can connect, contribute, and thrive?
 - Consider data sources and information on lived experience to understand barriers, gaps, and pressures and which people or communities are most affected.
- What is already supporting these conditions?
What is missing?
 - Reflect on the strengths, relationships, and existing efforts we can build on, as well as where we see gaps or opportunities to do more together.
- Where are we best positioned to contribute alongside others through direct service, resource navigation, partnership, and/or advocacy?
 - Brainstorm opportunities to collaborate to strengthen a pressing community need.

Summary

Supporting well-being is ongoing work. The conditions that shape daily life are not fixed; they shift with policy, investment, and the collective efforts of people and organizations working together over time.

As you continue this work, consider mapping the conditions most affecting your members and community using local data alongside lived experience, and explore where the Y is already contributing and where new partnerships or advocacy efforts could make a meaningful difference. Small, well-connected efforts can grow into broader change when they are grounded in relationships, responsive to community voice, and aligned with others working toward the same goals.

For more information and to support your Y's efforts in supporting well-being, [visit Link to explore the Six Levers of Connection](#) and associated resources or submit a [Service Delivery Support Request](#).



Measurement and Evaluation

To understand the impact of connection efforts across communities, we encourage Ys to use a shared approach to measuring outcomes whenever possible. Our **Measurement Library** and accompanying **Individual-Level Measure Overview** provide a collection of validated and research-informed measures aligned with Achievement, Relationships, Belonging, Connection, and Contribution (ARBCC).

Ys should use measures from the Measurement Library when selecting outcome measures whenever they align with local goals and evaluation needs or when required by Y-USA or grant reporting. Using shared measures allows Ys to learn from one another, contribute to a broader evidence base, and better understand how different approaches to the Six Levers of Connection influence ARBCC outcomes.

While local organizations may identify additional measures that are meaningful for their context, the use of validated, research-informed scales is encouraged whenever possible to support data quality, comparability, and continuous learning across the Creating Connected Communities initiative.

Measuring impact is essential to understanding how efforts are strengthening connection and contribution and to guiding learning and improvement over time. To support these efforts, consider the following:

- **Collect data on outcomes:** Track changes in skill development related to achievement, relationships, belonging, connection, and contribution—not just participation.
- **Use a shared measurement approach:** Align with common measurement tools using our Measurement Library and Measurement Compendium to ensure consistency across the Movement.
- **Combine experience and engagement data:** Pair participant feedback with participation and retention metrics to understand both reach and impact.
- **Use data for learning and improvement:** Regularly reflect on findings to strengthen practices, elevate what's working, and adapt over time.





Measurement and Evaluation Prompts

These prompts can help you better understand what data to collect and how to interpret it as you work to elevate connection:



Elevate Connection

- To what extent are we, as an organization, actively lifting up the importance of connection and contribution through our messaging, storytelling, leadership actions, and partnerships?
- To what extent are we seeing increased awareness, alignment, and shared ownership of connection and contribution across our organization and community? How do we know?
- How can we use what we're learning to strengthen how we lift up and communicate the importance of connection and expand what's working to reach more people?



Practice Connection Skills

- To what extent are staff, volunteers, and leaders practicing connection skills in daily interactions?
- Which skill(s) appear strongest across our Y, and which need more intentional development?
- How do we know whether people feel seen, valued, included, and able to contribute?
- How are leaders coaching, observing, reinforcing, and embedding these skills?
- What are we learning across the organization that can help us with training, supervision, team routines, and community partnerships?



Embed Connection Everywhere

- To what extent is connection intentionally integrated into the design and delivery of our existing programs, services, member experiences, and community partnerships?
- What evidence suggests that connection-building practices are being adopted consistently across different areas of our work and leading to stronger relationships and belonging?
- What are we learning about the practices that help connection happen consistently, and how can we build on those insights across more areas of our work?



Measurement and Evaluation Prompts

These prompts can help you better understand what data to collect and how to interpret it as you work to elevate connection:



Create Connected Spaces

- To what extent are our physical and digital environments helping people feel welcomed, included, and connected? How do we know?
- What evidence do we have that changes to our spaces are improving accessibility, interaction, relationship-building, and a sense of belonging among participants?
- How can we use what we are learning to strengthen connected spaces, remove barriers, and expand practices that are helping people connect and contribute?



Invite Contribution

- How well are we helping people recognize that they have something valuable to contribute and making it easy for them to get involved?
- How are staff, volunteers, members, and community partners stepping into opportunities to contribute their talents, perspectives, and leadership? What evidence do we see?
- What are we learning about the conditions that help people contribute, and how can we build on those insights to engage more people in meaningful ways?



Support Well-Being

- How well are we helping people strengthen their well-being so they have the capacity, confidence, and support needed to connect with others and participate in their community?
- What evidence suggests that participants are experiencing improvements in well-being and greater access to the supports, resources, and relationships that help them thrive?
- What are we learning about the connection between well-being and social connection, and how can we build on those insights to help more people thrive together?



Next Steps

To support your Y in elevating connection and engagement across the Six Levers of Connection, consider the following:

Clarify Why, Build Knowledge, and Gain Commitment

Build a shared understanding of why social connection matters and how it aligns with the Y's mission. This step establishes common language, increases awareness, and builds internal commitment so connection becomes a core outcome and not an add-on.

Convene a Leadership/Implementation Team

Form a small, cross-functional group to champion the work, guide decision-making, coordinate efforts, and maintain momentum. This team ensures accountability, alignment, and shared ownership across the organization.

Determine Where to Focus

To set your Y's direction, assess the current state and define the desired future state. This will help your Y determine if you'll focus on experimenting with integrating connection into how you operate, create spaces that nurture interaction and belonging, make it easier for everyone to contribute, and/or improve conditions so people can thrive.

Generate and Select Ideas to Test with Potential for Early Wins

Invite staff, volunteers, members, and partners to imagine new or improved ways to practice connection skills. This collaborative ideation process strengthens relationships while surfacing creative, community grounded solutions. Then, prioritize ideas that are feasible, mission aligned, and likely to show impact quickly. Early wins build confidence, demonstrate value, and create momentum for broader change.

Experiment and Adapt

Develop an experiment plan and solution narrative. Pilot ideas on a small scale, gathering feedback, and using measurement to learn and refine. Leverage resources like the YMCA Learning Hub and YMCA Learning Centers for skill development support. This step reinforces a culture of learning, trust, and continuous improvement.

Explore Bright Spots

Identify examples – within the Y and beyond – where connection and contribution are already working well in programs, practices, and policies. Complete a journey map to learn from bright spots and established leading practices to help inform your strategy and inspire what's possible.

Inventory What's Already Happening

Take stock of where connection is embedded within your Y's programs, practices, and policies. This step honors current work and identifies assets to build on rather than starting from scratch.

Visit Link

For more information and to support your Y's efforts to strengthen connection and contribution skills, visit Link to explore the Six Levers of Connection and associated resources or submit a Service Delivery Support Request.