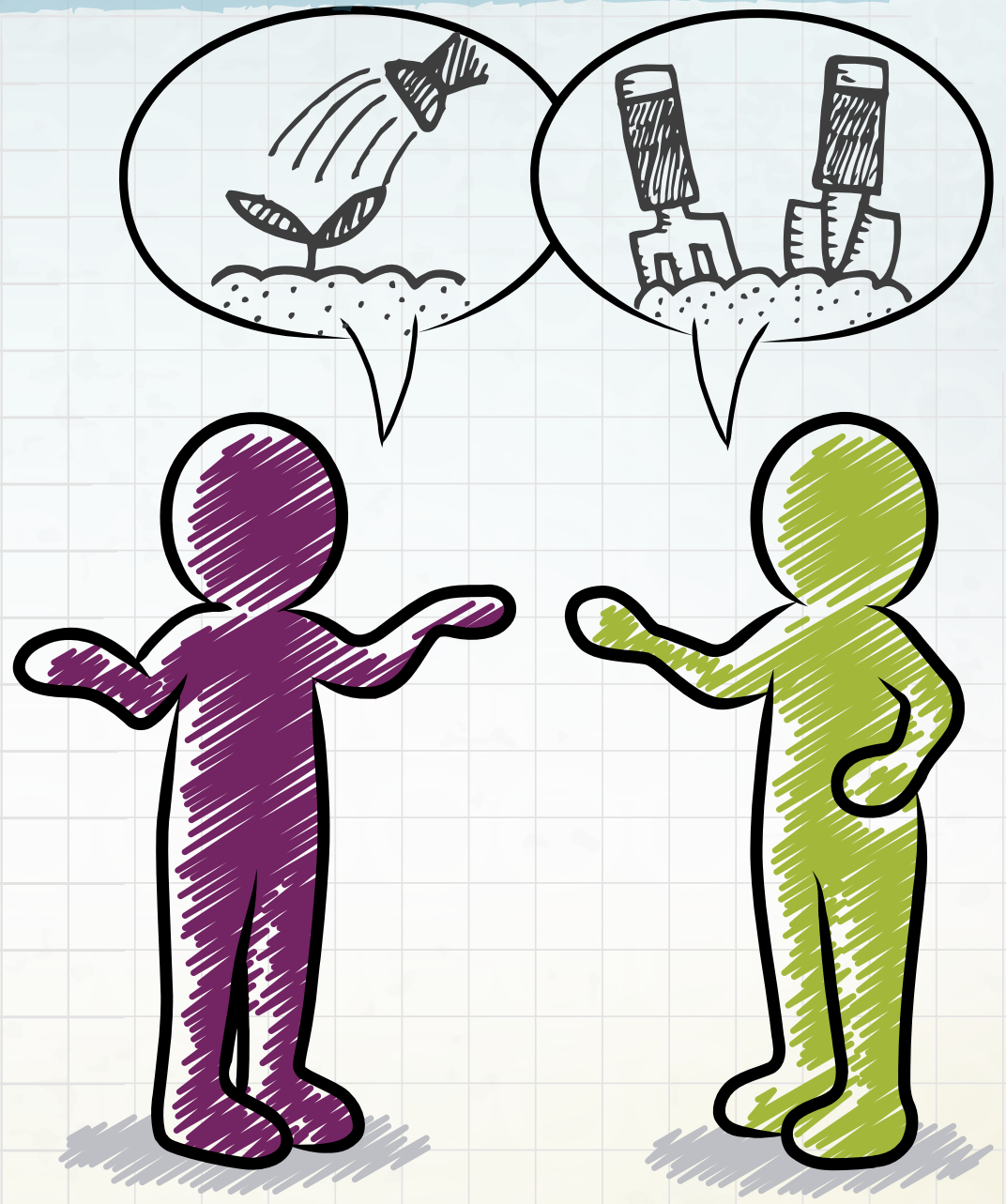


# Youth Mentors

## A Model of Peer Leadership



Prepared by Wilder Research in partnership  
with the Youth Leadership Initiative

# What do we mean by **youth mentors**?

**Youth mentors are young people in a youth program who are actively involved in designing and facilitating program activities for other youth in the program.**

The Wilder Foundation's Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) is a youth leadership program. Their goal is for all young people in their program to develop leadership skills. Being a youth mentor is an opportunity for young people to share responsibility with staff and volunteers to help other youth develop leadership skills.

## What will you find in this overview?

**You'll find a detailed description of YLI's approach to developing youth mentors in their program.** YLI has used a youth mentor approach since the program started. In recent years, they have been asked by other youth workers about how to more deeply involve youth in program development and delivery. Put another way, these other youth workers were asking YLI how to transform "program participants" into "program directors." One way that YLI does this is through their youth mentor approach.

This overview walks through the youth mentor framework and the four major steps of YLI's youth mentor cycle: 1) Recruiting youth mentors, 2) Preparing youth mentors, 3) Sharing responsibility, and 4) Providing ongoing support and feedback.

## Why use a youth mentor approach?

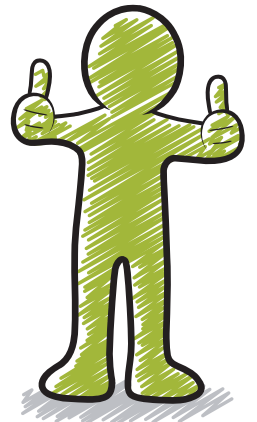
**A youth mentor approach can help a youth program be responsive, effective, and innovative for its participants.** YLI's youth mentor approach allows the program to continuously improve, better meet young people's needs, and engage young people as co-creators. Because of the value placed on the experiences of youth mentors as past participants and equal partners, sharing power is possible.

## How did we make this overview?

**We talked with YLI staff, volunteers, and youth mentors.** To make this guide, we discussed YLI's youth mentor approach at length. We talked about the values that guide the youth mentor approach, the "journey" that youth mentors take as part of the model, and the outcomes of the model for youth and for the program.

## Why did we make this overview?

**We hope that this overview provides useful information for youth programs as they determine how to involve youth in helping to lead their program.** YLI believes in this model and can speak to the benefits that using it has had on their program—and they want to share and teach their approach with others. **If you are interested in starting to use a youth mentor approach at your organization, please contact YLI program director Nou Yang at [nou.yang@wilder.org](mailto:nou.yang@wilder.org).** If you have questions about how this overview was created, please contact Ryan Evans at [ryan.evans@wilder.org](mailto:ryan.evans@wilder.org).



# What is the Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI)?

Throughout this overview, we make a lot of references to the Wilder Foundation's Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI), so we thought it would be helpful for you to know a little bit about YLI.

YLI is a multicultural program that is co-managed by a team of youth mentors. It is designed to help youth develop strong, effective leadership skills to lead in diverse community settings. The program assists youth in learning about themselves, working with others, and engaging in meaningful action. The six building blocks of YLI are learning, community, action, culture, character, and leadership.

At YLI, a cohort of youth in grades 9-12 take part in a year-long commitment, participating in learning retreats, cultural exploration sessions, action teams, and school support activities:

- » **Learning Retreats:** Youth attend three multicultural learning retreats where they explore concepts of leadership, strengthen cross-cultural relationships, and participate in experiential learning activities that focus on working effectively with others.
- » **Cultural Exploration Sessions:** Youth identify and create learning cohorts based on a shared aspect of their cultural identities. Aided by a Cultural Coach, youth explore their culture and heritage and its impact on their leadership style and personal development.
- » **Action Teams:** Youth participate in weekly multicultural teams that focus on providing service to the community. Youth learn how to lead their own meetings, identify community partners, and design and implement their own projects with community partners.
- » **School Support:** Youth discuss the importance of education, set school improvement goals, learn about higher education, and are provided with structured support based on individual needs.



The Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) is grounded in the belief that  
**youth have tremendous skills and talents, invaluable and  
unique perspectives and passion and commitment**  
—all of which have the potential to benefit our community.

Stemming from this core belief that young people are not problems but part of the solution, YLI provides young people with support and leadership opportunities that are comprehensive, positive, participatory and encourages youth involvement in the community. YLI's strengths-based approach involves youth in decision making at all levels of the program and ensures success by building strong, respectful, and committed relationships with youth.

# Framework for YLI's youth mentor approach

YLI holds the guiding belief that youth are leaders now and the grounding philosophy of “nothing about us without us.”

In pursuit of this value, YLI has used a youth mentor approach to elevate youth participation, voice, and leadership across the program, as well as to provide an opportunity for youth participants to progress on their leadership journey by developing and practicing their leadership skills with their peers. Below are three values that guide YLI's youth mentor approach.

## 1 Youth voice



Typically, when adults and youth interact, adults have more power. YLI practices

elevating youth voice by recognizing young people as knowledgeable actors and incorporating them into everything that YLI does. This requires adults to utilize their power to create equitable and inclusive spaces for young people. YLI's “youth voice” value is about reexamining and reworking that power. YLI's youth mentor approach represents one way that YLI honors youth voice—by supporting youth mentors to design and facilitate programming as well as mentor their peers in the program.

## 2 Youth-adult partnership



For YLI's youth mentors and the adults who support the youth mentors, this value is seen in having a team approach to everything and the same expectations for youth and adults—such as showing up consistently, doing what it takes to get things done, sharing opinions openly and respectfully, and being willing to share their viewpoints—especially if it differs from

others on the team. YLI is careful to not tokenize young people but to create an equitable youth-adult partnership experience.

**For youth**, this means recognizing that they are no longer recipients of a program but now they are drivers of the program, just like staff. Together, youth and adults share power, responsibility, decision making, and visible tasks such as program facilitation and invisible tasks such as program design and management.

**For adults**, this means making space for youth to offer their ideas, asking questions with curiosity rather than with a “right” answer in mind, observing youth mentors' work and offering praise and constructive criticism, sharing their viewpoints openly and respectfully, and being open to other ways of thinking or working.

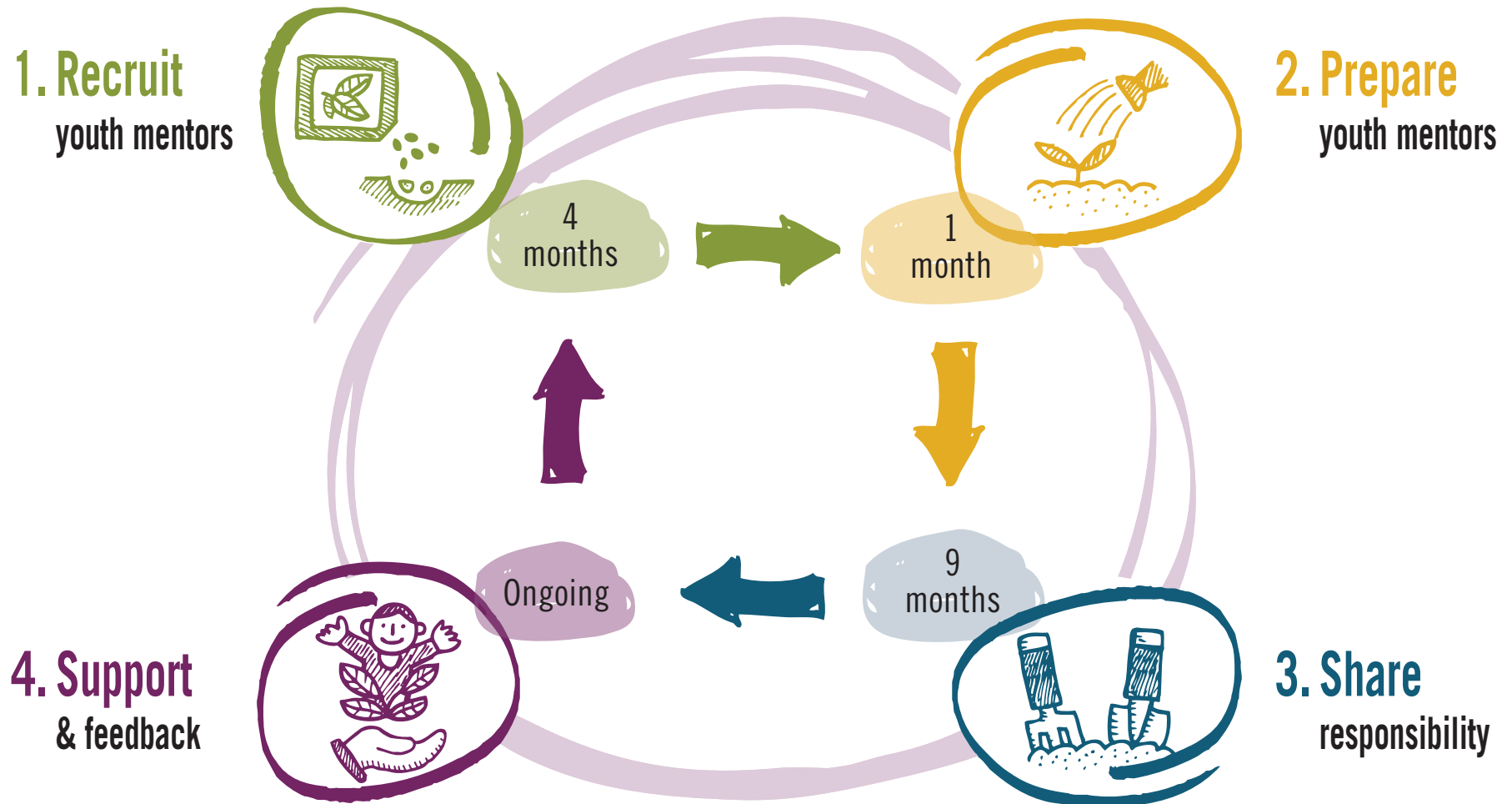
## 3 Personal growth and leadership development



YLI believes that leadership is an individual journey and a reflective practice. We can't be great leaders in the community if we don't know how to lead ourselves. Therefore, YLI creates opportunities to build skills

and support our leaders in a holistic way, such as supporting their social and emotional development; goals for life, family, relationships, college, and career; and individual goals to be a better leader to others. Additionally, YLI does community building activities in order to develop a sense of team and prepare youth mentors to lead.

# YLI's youth mentor cycle





# 1. Recruit youth mentors

YLI's youth mentor recruitment process is designed and executed by current youth mentors. It begins informally by encouraging youth participants to observe and recognize the leadership acts of their peers, and to consider becoming a youth mentor, and then enters a formalized process of nominating youth mentors, inviting a selection of those nominated to apply, and then interviewing and offering a youth mentor role to selected youth participants.

**Timing note:** Youth mentors are recruited and confirmed for the following year as the current YLI program year ends.

## “Planting seeds”



## Nominations and selection



## Invitations and applications



## Interviews and offers

← Four months →

- » Youth mentorship presentation  
Current youth mentors give a presentation about their experiences as youth mentors—mainly focusing on how the “youth mentor process” works
- » One-on-one conversations  
Current youth mentors and YLI staff and volunteers have one-on-one conversations with youth participants that express interest in being a youth mentor or they think will be successful as youth mentors

- » Open nomination period  
Youth participants and youth mentors nominate others to be youth mentors; youth can self-nominate  
To nominate someone, youth must fill out a nomination form explaining why they feel their nominee will make a good youth mentor
- » Nominee selection  
Current youth mentors and YLI staff and volunteers create selection criteria for assessing nominees and determine which nominees they will invite to apply to become youth mentors

- » Invitation to apply  
YLI staff inform selected nominees by phone and letter that they have been asked to apply to become a youth mentor
- » Application  
Youth who choose to apply complete an application with a series of questions about themselves as well as write an essay about why they want to be a youth mentor  
  
*Note: All youth mentors—new and returning—need to go through the application process to become a youth mentors; returning youth mentors are not automatically youth mentors again*

- » Panel interview  
Youth who complete an application are interviewed by a panel about why they want to become a youth mentor; this panel is comprised of graduating youth mentors and YLI staff
- » Facilitation exercise  
Youth mentors who complete an application facilitate a group exercise to showcase their facilitation style and skills
- » Offer  
Youth are offered a youth mentor role by letter and phone; this offer includes important dates for the second phase of YLI's youth mentor approach



## 2. Prepare youth mentors

YLI's preparation period for youth mentors is intensive. The team-building portion includes a 12-day trip to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA); this serves to build relationships and trust among youth mentors, YLI staff, and volunteers. The knowledge and skill building portion includes a plethora of learning exercises; this serves to give youth mentors a training in foundational values that ground YLI's work as well as introduce youth mentors to skills that they will build throughout the year.

**Timing note:** YLI prepares youth mentors before recruitment for the standard YLI programming begins; this allows youth mentors to assist in all phases of YLI's full program year.

### Team-building



### Knowledge and skill building

← One month →

#### » Wilderness training

Youth mentors, along with YLI staff and volunteers, receive three days of wilderness training during which they learn the basics of living in the BWCA, such as canoeing, camping, backpacking, etc.

#### » Wilderness experience

Youth mentors, YLI staff, and volunteers live in the BWCA for nine days; youth mentors are assigned different responsibilities for the team each day; each night, there is a team debrief to reflect on the experiences of the day; each youth mentor receives a journal to document their experiences and reflections; members of the YLI community send letters encouraging youth mentors while they are in the BWCA, which youth mentors receive as the wilderness experience ends

YLI partners with YMCA Camp Widjiwagan to provide this outdoor leadership learning and team-building experience for the youth mentors.

#### » YLI overview and history

YLI staff and volunteers teach youth mentors about YLI's approach and history; this sometimes is in the form of a skit by YLI staff and volunteers

#### » Youth mentorship goals

Youth mentors learn about the role that youth mentors play in the YLI program; youth mentors create goals for how they will help fulfill YLI's program goals, set personal leadership goals, and help others in the program develop leadership skills

#### » Key training topics

Through hands-on learning, youth mentors engage in understanding group facilitation, peer mentoring, curriculum development, Art of Hosting practices, and the experiential learning cycle

#### » Skill practice

Youth mentors practice skills that they will use as they design and facilitate aspects of YLI's programming, such as group decision-making skills and group facilitation skills



# 3. Share responsibility

**Timing note:** The nine-month period during which YLI staff and volunteers “share responsibility” with the youth mentors is YLI’s standard programming period, which goes through May.

Beginning with recruitment for standard YLI programming, YLI staff and volunteers begin to share responsibility with the youth mentors. Shared responsibility for youth mentors means actively participating and taking responsibility for ensuring that YLI’s programming is successful. For staff and volunteers, shared responsibility means making room for dialogue and input from youth mentors and then honoring this input.

YLI program recruitment



Design and facilitation



Role modeling and maintaining relationships

← Nine months →

» “Connector” to potential YLI participants

As youth themselves, youth mentors have connections to many youth who could become YLI participants; youth mentors tell their friends about YLI, coordinate dates/times for YLI staff to join them in their classes and tell their classmates about YLI, and follow up with youth at their schools who told YLI staff that they were interested in joining YLI; youth mentors also design and facilitate parent orientation, a part of the recruitment process for YLI

» YLI retreats

Youth mentors are responsible for designing and facilitating YLI’s three weekend retreats—which occur in October, February, and May; at these retreats, youth mentors are responsible for managing the agenda, preparing various spaces, and facilitating large group activities, meal time activities and cabin reflections

» YLI celebrations

Youth mentors are in charge of designing and facilitating YLI’s special events and the YLI graduation; for the YLI graduation, youth mentors emcee the event, and create invitations and certificates

» Role modeling

In addition to designing and facilitating YLI retreats and celebrations, through the program year youth mentors participate in standard YLI programming; as participants, youth mentors model what they as designers and facilitators of YLI programming view

**“Design and facilitation” and “Role modeling and maintaining relationships” are the main things that youth mentors do during the year. These are ongoing activities and they occur simultaneously.**

as positive and productive participation, in hopes that doing so supports other youth to actively engage in knowledge and skill building

» Maintaining relationships

As participants and mentors in YLI programming, youth mentors can help youth participants maintain their connection with YLI; for example, if a participant has been absent, a youth mentor who goes to their same school might check in with them





# 4. Provide ongoing support and feedback

YLI staff and volunteers have weekly meetings with youth mentors to help them design programming and offer feedback after youth mentors facilitate YLI retreats and celebrations. In addition, YLI staff and volunteers meet on a weekly basis without youth mentors present to plan how they can best support each youth mentor. This support can be checking in with youth mentors outside of programming time—such as taking youth mentors out to meals—or other ways of spending quality time with youth mentors.

**Timing note:** YLI staff and volunteers provide ongoing support and feedback to youth mentors throughout the entire youth mentor process; it is labeled as the “last step” in the youth mentor approach as a way to delineate it from other parts of the model—and because after youth mentors begin designing and facilitating programming, YLI staff and volunteers truly shift to a “support role” in regards to the YLI retreats and celebrations.

## Providing structure



## Providing real-time support and feedback

← Ongoing →

### » Planning and coordinating the youth mentorship model

In addition to planning and executing the “normal programming” on a weekly basis, YLI staff and volunteers plan and coordinate the youth mentor approach (it should be noted that much of this planning and coordinating is done in partnership with current youth mentors; for instance, YLI staff and volunteers determine that youth mentors will design and facilitate three retreats and then do much of the logistical planning so that the youth mentors can focus on building their skills related to program design and facilitation)

Examples of key questions that are asked during planning and coordinating are:

- What else is needed to support the youth mentors?
- How are they balancing their many roles as friend, facilitator, mentor, and learner?
- How is the team functioning?
- How can we structure the youth mentor meetings to be more effective?

### » Weekly meetings with youth mentors

YLI staff and volunteers meet with youth mentors on a weekly basis to plan for the activities that youth mentors are responsible for as well as to check in with youth mentors about their experiences so far; these weekly meetings allow YLI staff and volunteers a regular opportunity to offer support and feedback to youth mentors based on their observations throughout the week; likewise, these meetings allow youth mentors to ask about aspects of their role that they have questions or concerns about

### » Weekly meetings with YLI staff and volunteers

In addition to weekly meetings with youth mentors, YLI staff and volunteers meet weekly to discuss and debrief their observations of youth mentors and determine how best to support the youth mentors in their responsibilities—this support may include everything from verbal encouragement to constructive criticism to corrective advice

# Benefits of the youth mentor approach

**What do you see as the value or benefit of a youth mentor approach?**

**What is the value for a youth program? What is the benefit for youth mentors?**

Examples from YLI

Youth mentors learn about themselves

“I feel like when we were over at the Boundary Waters, there was a lot of time for reflecting every single day. That really helped me to understand myself. At mentor boot camp, we kept doing reflecting, looking into yourself and who you are. I feel like that has really helped me in every aspect of life as a leader and as a friend. It has really helped me to grow and to help myself help other people.” –YLI Youth Mentor

Youth mentors grow more confident

“I feel really confident. If I want to make a change I feel like I can. I have met a lot of people in YLI. I feel like I can make a difference. I feel very confident about it. I am not afraid to step up and do it.” –YLI Youth Mentor

“You never know what you can do. It’s made me more independent. I used to follow people around. I now make my own actions and decide for myself.” –YLI Youth Mentor

Youth mentors appreciate guidance from staff

“It’s nice to have someone to hold you accountable to reaching your goals. It’s nice to talk to someone who will tell you what you need to work on or what is going on. When they see that you are improving, it’s nice hear someone say that. I really like the one-on-ones.” –YLI Youth Mentor

Youth mentors reflect on their leadership in YLI

“I like to see others grow, you can see them change, everything about them is kind of different and I like that. Maybe they aren’t as shy or they speak up or they are doing things that they never thought they would do, stuff like that. They open up.”

– YLI Youth Mentor

**What would a youth mentor approach look like for your program?**

**What would your program have to do to begin using a youth mentor approach?**

A large grid of graph paper, consisting of 20 columns and 30 rows of small squares, intended for writing answers to the questions above.

