



# COVID and the Club:

# Conversations with Boys & Girls Club leaders

# on providing services during COVID-19

## Issue



- Boys & Girls Clubs provide numerous avenues for youth to connect, be physically active, and have healthy meals/snacks.
- These services are often provided to low-income families at reduced cost to bridge the gap in after school and summer childcare.
- Preliminary studies show BGC youth, as compared to those who don't attend care programs, are more physically active and more food secure while being impacted by social connections at the Club.
- However, many of these clubs were forced to dramatically change their services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**This study aimed to understand how 13 BGCs experienced COVID-19 and persevered to provide services to their families.**

## Findings



### Activities

**Changed dramatically** – Major changes in programming limited agency and activities that required sharing. Children couldn't pick activities as they used to, and activity rotations were limited at times. One leader said this when it came to agency at the Club:

“The club can be a profound experience for kids because it might be the only place they have agency at all. It may also be the only place where they feel like they can try new things and not feel judgment for it, where they can fail appropriately and learn how to deal with it in other ways other than people being angry at them or them being angry at themselves. All that comes with decision making in that agency.”

**Online programming** – Clubs created online programming through YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms. These videos provided children activities to do at home during the pandemic.

**New activities** – Clubs stepped up in this time to offer new activities and programming to give back to the community. Many distributed meals to families and became hubs for others looking to provide services during the pandemic.

One innovative program “Adopt a Grandparent” involved the children writing letters to those in care facilities and participating in Zoom calls to promote social interaction with those that may be stuck inside.

“So, let's think about others. And so, we had our members to make cards to put in the senior boxes that went to those seniors, because a lot of people did not realize that when it happened, a lot of people isolated and stayed away from their senior members of their family because they didn't want to infect them.”



## Barriers

**Social Distancing** – Having to keep kids distanced was an obvious barrier and one that was difficult for many leaders. Activities had to change to adapt to this.

**Space** – Due to guidelines groups had to be spaced out and typically contained in their own room. Clubs with less space and fewer rooms had to reduce capacity to fit the space they had.

**Staffing** – Staff-to-child ratios were lowered to increase safety but that also increased the number of staff needed while decreasing the number of children Clubs were able to serve.

**Limited Capacity** – Because of limits in staffing and space all leaders commented on the limited number of children they were able to serve in the Club. This limitation was difficult for many.

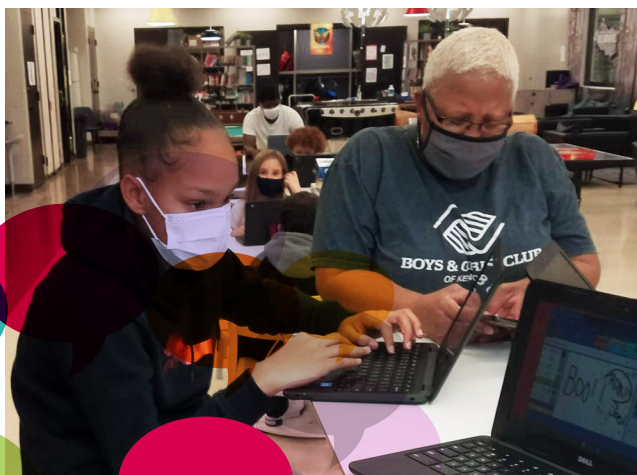
“

But when we had to reduce our kids to fifty percent, we had to figure out which hundred and fifty kids don't get to eat today. Which kids are we not going to pick up today that need help with homework? You know, that was the hardest thing. We still know those kids still call us, 'When do I get to come back to the club?'"

**Financial** – This limited capacity and increased cleaning costs created difficult financial times as many club leaders discussed how they were no longer able to do large fundraising events as well.

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A lot of people were out of work which affected, like being able to pay for the program. A lot of our donors were in weird situations, they couldn't give as much or anything if they could. We had to shut down fundraisers because you obviously can't have three hundred people in a building. So I think funding was probably the biggest impact.”



## Supports

**Local Businesses** – Many local businesses stepped up to provide in-kind donations for child activity bags as well as donating cleaning and pandemic specific supplies like disinfecting misters, masks, and wipes.

**Other Non-profits** – Club leaders mentioned partnering with several other non-profits in their communities like food banks, mental health services, and other support agencies to expand their impact in the community.

**Financial** – Clubs also received financial support from local and national sources during the pandemic including local corporation grants and national relief funds as well as from families in the community.

**Food** – Many clubs were able to partner with restaurants and other food related services to provide meals during this time.

## Strengths

**Strong Staff/Leadership** – Club leaders stated one of their strengths during this time was the passionate staff and engaged leadership. The pandemic challenged, inspired, and brought these staff members together in ways that may not have been previously thought.

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So I really look at that, the strength, a major strength of this, our staff and their willingness to pull together and do what they had to do for the kids and their families.”

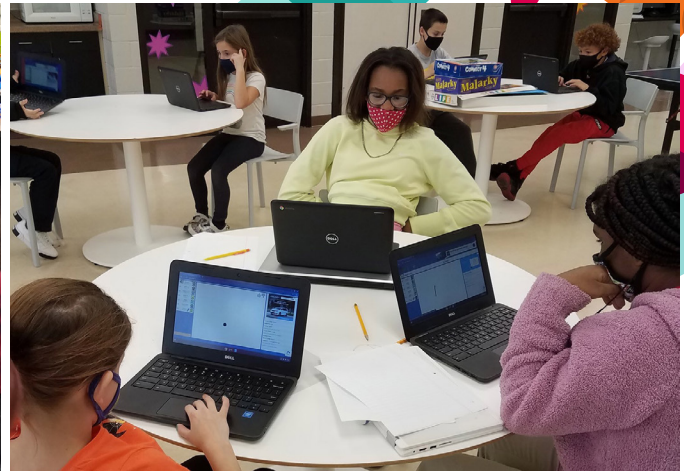
**Community Connections** – Several leaders also mentioned the community came together to support the Club and in turn the families they served.

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And that's us coming all together and coming up with the game plan. What are the needs and how can we help with those needs and who can we partner up and who is offering things in the community? And that's what's so great about our community and our club, is that we have so much support from our community in general. Everyone supports us in different ways and we all team up.”

**Planning** – While some clubs had more rigorous planning than others, developing a plan and sticking with it was a major point of strength for several clubs. These plans help calm families' fears and ensure them the Clubs were doing all that they could to keep them safe.





## Advice

**Communication** – Many leaders expressed the need for communicating with families and really listening to what they need most. Both clear communication to children and families on the procedures and plans put in place to keep them safe but also listening to the families in their time of need. Clubs even placed calls to families and set up times where members could call in to talk to their favorite staff members to still feel connected.

“

One thing I would say is reach out to those families that are utilizing your service to find out what they need, because without our families and our members, there would be no Boys & Girls club. So we have to find out from them what their immediate needs are because that's what we're here for.”

**Stay positive** – These were difficult times, but leaders relayed the need to not take things for granted and stay positive.

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Mostly just to be positive about it. I know it's hard only seeing like eight to ten kids in our club when it's normally, like, bursting at the seams during summer. So just really like not taking for granted like the kids that you do have, even if it's a much smaller of an impact, like it's still making a positive impact. So, I say just focus on the positives and not focus on what you're not able to do; just be really good at what you are able to do.”

## Implications



- **Boys & Girls Club services changed significantly during the pandemic.**
- Normal activities were no longer possible; however, leaders (alongside their communities) came together to positively impact their communities in difficult times.
- Leaders expressed the foundation of their clubs: serving the families and children of the community; and found ways to do that.
- Communities were reminded of the power and value of these programs especially when capacity was limited.

## Methods



- Key stakeholder interviews were conducted with 16 BGC leaders from 13 different BGCs.
- Open-ended questions were used to elicit leaders' experiences with the pandemic, services their club was able to offer, barriers overcome, and supports crucial to their ability to serve their communities.
- Leaders were asked to relay advice for other clubs and organizations based on their experiences.
- Themes were distilled from recorded talks and transcripts.

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