

Fostering Soft Skills

Habitat Youth Leaders

In today's fast-paced, digital environment, many children find themselves struggling because real-world education is not emphasized in schools. Yet, students could greatly benefit from a curriculum that stresses 21st-century soft skills from a young age, to enable an easy transition from schooling to the workplace. The absence of this type of teaching has long-term effects noticeable even in higher education and the job market; in fact, the Society for Human

Abhay Kopardekar
Vikram Gedipudi
Ahilan Karuppasami
Vasaav Gupta
Habitat Youth Leaders

Resources has found that “nearly 3 in 4 employers say they have a hard time finding graduates with the soft skills their companies need.” The school closures necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which kept children out of school and unable to interact socially, further exacerbated this problem.

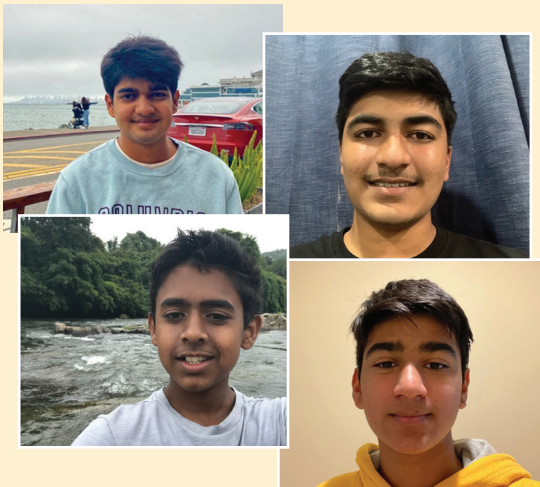
Elementary school is an ideal time for students to develop the soft skills that will best prepare them for their future, as these skills must be emphasized

from an early age. In addition, teaching elementary school students important life skills, such as public speaking, allows them to develop confidence in themselves, and fosters a desire to continue learning new skills. Because teaching these skills is not mandatory in most elementary schools, however, many students are left voiceless and miss out on opportunities to build confidence in themselves.

Our Mission

Habitat Youth Leaders strives to fill this education gap by providing accessible, practical, and free core-skill education opportunities to youth. Since our inception in 2020, we have been particularly focused on educating children on soft skills such as problem-solving, leadership, and critical thinking, as well as life skills such as email writing, basic financial literacy, and public speaking. It is important to cultivate these skills in children from a very young age so that they stick with them throughout their lives, and foster their curiosity.

Who We Are



From top left: Abhay Kopardekar (Executive President and Co-founder), Vikram Gedipudi (Co-founder), Ahilan Karuppasami (Vice President), and Vaasav Gupta (Chief Operating Officer).

We are high school students with a passion for working with younger students (Abhay and Vikram are seniors from California, Ahilan is a junior from California, and Vaasav is a junior from New Jersey). As students, we were disheartened to realize elementary schoolers were missing out on recess—our favorite time of the day when we were young—and the important social interaction. Growing up in Silicon Valley, where there is heavy emphasis on STEM skills, we wanted to ensure that soft skills were not being overshadowed. Abhay and Vikram began by interviewing students of family friends to figure out what specific problems elementary school students faced through distance learning and what skills they felt they were in most need of learning. From there, under four dedicated leaders, Habitat Youth Leaders has blossomed into a global organization aspiring to continue impacting the youth community in various ways.

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we recognized that students were being deprived of social interaction. Therefore, our initial goal was to create an outlet for social interaction for students while mentoring them in soft skills that would be vital for their future. As the pandemic gradually eases, our organization is still focused on providing soft skill education globally, and ensuring educational equality for all. By providing valuable real-world education, we not only prepare children for future growth but also foster a valuable out-of-school social community that has become particularly important for many children during the pandemic.

Our Projects and Our Methods

To accomplish our ambitious goals, we have taken several constructive and beneficial steps. We frequently organize free, one-hour seminars for children through organizations like the YMCA, public libraries, or low-income schools. These seminars have focused on multiple topics—financial literacy, critical thinking, collaborative skills, and internet literacy, to name just a few. During the seminars, we encourage active participation to create a more immersive learning experience for the children.

The seminars typically include lessons and activities as well as collaborative projects to allow children to socialize and have fun while learning. For example, our primary activities are tailored to specific skills such as public speaking games (communication), trading simulations (financial literacy), and



scavenger hunts (time management), followed by team games like Jeopardy and Kahoot. The collaborative and social aspects of our seminars have been particularly beneficial in the last year, as children have not been able to leave their homes and socialize physically with others their age.

We also create engaging competitions for students, with opportunities for them to win prizes. An example of one such competition is our ongoing Summer Soft Skills Challenge, in which K-5 students from anywhere in the world can participate in a challenge by responding to a prompt relating to either communication, creative art, leadership, creative writing, or problem-solving. Winners will receive a free T-shirt with “HYL Soft Skill Challenge Winner” printed on it and will be interviewed and showcased on our website. Furthermore, Habitat Youth Leaders will contact local media organizations to arrange for additional recognition. If appropriate, students also will be connected with professionals to implement project proposals.

As many students remain in a virtual environment, we are

also designing asynchronous courses to help them develop independent learning abilities. Our asynchronous courses cover a range of life skills, such as music reading, humorous speaking, planner making, speech writing, negotiation, cooking, origami making, and experimental design. As an engaging way for students to learn, these courses consist of YouTube videos explaining certain skills and concepts followed by a plethora of interactive activities. You can find our completed asynchronous courses on our YouTube channel provided in the Get Involved section at the end of this article.

In addition, current events are essential for young people to gain a good understanding of the world in which we live. Our team noticed that many students are not interested in news because it is not engaging and difficult to comprehend. In light of this, we wanted to create news videos specifically designed to fit the interest of elementary students. Our videos have content ranging from the environment, food, and sports. We also try to explain complicated concepts like the legislative system or a



war in an engaging and kid-friendly way. We have begun to upload these short news videos to our YouTube channel.

Finally, our ultimate goal is to implement a large-scale buddy system for elementary school students. Even after distanced learning dwindles, we are striving to create a buddy system by matching up elementary school students in small groups with high school or middle school mentors who serve as guiding figures and foster social interaction among the small groups. These groups would allow young students to receive advice and any aid they may need to succeed in school while also providing opportunities to play games and activities with their friends. These small groups would allow students to receive individual attention and also interact with their peers.



Our Fundraiser for the Children's Defense Fund

As children go back to school, we have been focused on raising money for impoverished students, specifically those who suffer from systematic racism. In the summer of 2021, we also began a fundraiser with a goal of raising \$2,000 to be donated to the Children's Defense Fund. The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) serves as a leading independent voice for all children in the United States, focusing on the needs of those most at risk due to poverty and inequality.

They advocate for effective policies, implement community-based programs, and provide public education and outreach for families to access life-saving resources and critical research about what helps children in America survive and succeed. We are striving toward this goal and welcome donations! Any amount could make an impact.

Our Impact

Habitat Youth Leaders is a global, student-run non-profit that has taught 1,000+ students, held 28+ seminars, and has 23 global

branches with \$1,000 in total funds raised. Through numerous seminars, workshops, and competitions, Habitat Youth Leaders has helped hundreds of children learn valuable soft skills and life skills critical for their future, interact with their friends, and, most important, develop their confidence and love for learning.

Our positive impact on today's youth is reflected in the growth of our organization. We have chapters making a difference in California, New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, Arizona, and we've even extended our reach globally, with branches in Singapore and India. As we inch closer to our \$2,000 goal for our seminar, we hope to impact numerous impoverished young students. In less than a year, our organization has grown from just two dedicated founders to nearly 30 students worldwide holding various positions and responsibilities, each one equally committed to creating a better future for today's youth. Going forward, we'll continue to hold seminars, workshops, and competitions virtually so that students anywhere can learn and participate. Habitat Youth Leaders is proud of the immeasurable positive impact we've made on countless young children in these difficult times through

our programs to educate youth and foster social interaction.

Get Involved

Visit www.habitatyouthleaders.org to check out and sign up for our upcoming seminars on public speaking and research skills, learn about our ongoing projects, view descriptions and pictures from our past seminars, and view our team of dedicated members! Subscribe to our YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIxaU1gtKprAm81WSGr4rHg>) for amazing news videos and asynchronous courses. Additionally, feel free to join our mailing list by visiting our website and signing up at www.habitatyouthleaders.org/maillinglist.

Our organization has opportunities to become a member as well as volunteer positions open for current middle or high schoolers. If you know any willing middle or high school student, please share our organization with them; they can apply at www.habitatyouthleaders.org/apply.

Lastly, we greatly encourage any parent volunteers who are interested in working with children or giving any guidance to help out in our organization. Feel free to contact us with any questions at habitatyouthleaders@gmail.com.

Voice of Youth

XtalksWORLDlistens

This unique social enterprise coaches young people in underrepresented communities in Africa and Asia to tell their stories to a camera and to a live local audience. These stories are then shared around the world, on a secure platform, for others to watch and reply to, starting conversations across continents and cultures. "We give these underrepresented young people a voice on the global stage. And we give the rest of the world their untapped wisdom."



The program began in 2017 in Northern Malawi, as MZUZUtalksWORLDlistens. Since that time, they have expanded to other communities in Malawi, India, Sierra Leone, and Vietnam—as XtalksWORLDlistens.

Learn more and watch videos at <https://www.xtalks.org>