

By recognizing the significant impact that nontraditional activities can have on young people's well-being, we can help them achieve their full potential.

# THE SKATEBOARD

## AS A PLATFORM FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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What comes to mind when you think about skateboarding? Depending on your age (wink), your initial thoughts might range from "kid's toy" to "action sport," or from "thrilling" to "dangerous" or even "annoying noise." Although skateboarding bore the reputation of a rebellious counterculture in its early days, it is becoming clear that there might be a more profound social and educational value to the activity. This article explores how the NGO Concrete Jungle Foundation (CJF) links skateboarding with education to reach and empower deprived individuals and communities around the world.



You might have noticed the choice to use the word "activity" instead of the word "sport." This is a somewhat sensitive topic among skateboarders; many are of the opinion that, although skateboarding is officially an Olympic sport now, the word "sport" is too limiting for the role that skateboarding plays in their lives. Let's explore this further.

Skateboarding is already separate from more traditional sports, due to its non-competitive nature. Furthermore, a rich culture has developed around the activity. Aspects of the culture include, among others:





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- An emphasis on community and togetherness (despite the individual character of practicing skateboarding)
- A strong “do it yourself” (DIY) ethos, with enthusiasts taking it upon themselves to create vibrant skateable places in vacant lots (often making them safer spaces in the process)
- A constant focus on exploration, creative expression, and resilience.

For many practitioners, skateboarding is a part of their life-style and identity, which has helped them grow into who they are today.

## Practice-Based Learning

Being fervent skateboarders themselves, the founders of CJF saw value in skateboarding that transcended an ordinary sport. Sure, when you’re skateboarding you practice skateboarding tricks, but many other things are happening that transcend the physical motions of your body:

- You practice challenging yourself, failing and falling constantly but getting back up to achieve success and building your confidence as a result
- You practice expressing yourself creatively by exploring what works for you when skating different obstacles and environments
- You practice interacting with and establishing a positive social environment.

The list goes on and on.

CJF’s founders saw skateboarding as a platform for alternative youth socialization—a practical school of life skills that attracts people from all walks of life. The free character of skateboarding seemed to have particular promise as a home for marginalized youth who don’t find their way onto the more conventional pathways of education and socialization (sometimes also referred to as “at-risk youth”).

CJF capitalizes on this opportunity to connect with

some of the harder to reach youth growing up in deprived places around the world, and utilizes skateboarding as a doorway for practice-based learning in general socialization, education, and employable skills. Let’s dive in!

“My experience teaching skateboarding at the [CJF skatepark] has been great. I see new students and old trying to improve themselves not just within skateboarding but also internally, it’s great to see how impactful skateboarding can be.”

—CJF Edu-Skate teacher

## The Edu-Skate Program

CJF’s work began in 2017, building a small skatepark at a school in the outskirts of Trujillo, Peru. In a neighborhood dealing with serious poverty and crime issues, the skatepark provided a safe space for youth. A key aspect of CJF’s vision is to go beyond just providing infrastructure projects, becoming actively involved in the social impact of the skateparks they’ve built. After the park build was completed, CJF set up an educational skate program—Edu-Skate—and integrated it into the school curriculum. Based on self-determination theory and its three universal components for psychological well-being (autonomy, social relatedness, and building competence), the program runs in 12-week seasons. Each lesson covers a different skill that is integral to skateboarding and life

in general. Instead of organizing the lessons purely around learning skateboarding tricks, the activities executed in the lessons are focused on the practice of (and reflection on) a specific life skill.

*Example of an Edu-Skate lesson: “Creativity”*

The teacher starts the lesson by discussing what creativity is with the students so everyone has a good



**I can create what I can imagine.**

understanding of it. Then the lesson goal is set; in this case, it is “Do a skateboard trick you haven’t seen anybody do before.” The students will have to tap into their creativity to achieve the lesson goal. After working on the lesson goal (and demonstrating the new tricks and their silly names), the session ends with a reflection on the life skill: How was the students’ experience of its practice? How does this skill apply to life outside of skateboarding?

“Creativity is important because then you can do things in your way.”

—*Edu-Skate student*

Two essential things started to happen around the Edu-Skate program in Peru that would determine the future development of CJF and its skateboarding-based programming.

First, although Edu-Skate was only taught to primary school students in the neighborhood, secondary school students and young adolescent skateboarders showed a lot of interest in the skatepark. They started to become involved in the project as youth leaders.

“I basically love what I do. I really love skating. I get to teach kids skateboarding and life skills I didn’t necessarily have when I was growing up. I know that I can help them progress and teach them right from wrong.”

—*CJF Edu-Skate teacher*

Second, the students couldn’t get enough of skateboarding. In coordination with the school, times were set outside of regular hours for the school to be opened for skateboard sessions. On weekend days, hordes of children would be waiting outside the school for the skatepark team to open the school gates. The children knew carefree joy, excitement, friendship, and achievement would be waiting for them.

The skatepark indeed served as a safe space for the children in the community. More than that, it became a place where a community started to form, a playground to practice the life skills learned in the program, and a doorway to expose youth to a range of other educational activities.

“While I can see someone considering the position as just a job, it is far more important than that. The interaction with the community is what makes the park so special. It has become a place





of refuge for many of the youth, and it's our duty to protect that.”

—CJF Skatepark Manager

## Development of Social Impact Through Skateboarding

Five years later, Concrete Jungle Foundation has built six skateparks for communities in need in four different countries and significantly expanded its programming activities to meet its mission of empowering individuals and communities through skateboarding around the world. Over 25 local people from the communities have been employed to execute educational activities through the skateparks for the youth in their communities, ranging from the Edu-Skate program, to a homework program, to music programs and beyond.

The “rough edges” of countless children have been “softened” throughout their involvement in the skateparks’ social environment. The skateparks provide a safe space for children and adults alike—a positive place where people can spend time together and find belonging, learn new things, and develop themselves.



“My first season managing the [CJF skatepark] has been a fulfilling experience on many levels. Bonding with the community and watching our kids grow, especially in the homework program, is heartwarming and motivates me to find more ways to engage not just our young people but those in our community of all ages.”

—CJF Project Manager





The work at the skateparks reached further than imagined. At the Freedom Skatepark in Jamaica, CJF provided regular education when in-person school was closed for almost two years during the pandemic and few children in the community had the means to access school online.

“The kids really took well to my presence and really appreciated the help I was giving them. Many times, they would thank me for the work we did, as the ones who do attend the online classes would get the same topics in classes after we would have covered them and were able to ace them. We all bond well together and it’s very motivating to have them return and always want to learn.”

—CJF Homework Teacher

“Three of the kids were speaking and said they are learning more than they do at school and that they are able to connect better and get more from the sessions than they would in a conventional class setting.”

—CJF Homework Teacher

The precise impact of the Freedom Skatepark and the Edu-Skate program throughout the pandemic has been analyzed by an independent researcher from the Goldsmith University in London. Results will be published on CJF’s website before the end of 2022.

## Growing Potential

The latest development from CJF is the Edu-Skate Worldwide Network, a partnership network of eight different social skate organizations around the world that are developing the Edu-Skate program. All partners are working with the program and sharing best practices and ideas about implementing skateboarding classes focused

on life skills. Reflecting the values Edu-Skate highlights in the practice of skateboarding, the organizations do their own thing but still make connections with each other to find support, learn from each other, and become more skillful in their work.

Skateboarding has a special power to bring people together and bring the most out of them. Although skateboarding is not a conventional approach for education and socialization, it certainly seems to have the potential to be an effective platform for it. Let’s take advantage of that!

