

# Kids Rank Annual Evaluation Report 2021-2022

## Grounding Social-Emotional Learning in Positive and Supportive Relationships

### Executive Summary



*Part of the power of Kids Rank is the insistence by Kids Rank Leaders that military-connected children deserve to thrive and that we should not normalize or shrug off the challenges they face.*



### Introduction

Kids Rank is a 501c(3) service organization serving military children. Founded in 2011, Kids Rank provides military children with safe spaces and social emotion skills to foster authentic connections with other military children and supportive adults, compassionate leadership, and service to their communities. For this evaluation, Kids Rank partnered with BECOME, a nonprofit movement building organization located in Chicago.

### Evaluation Methodology

The BECOME team used a Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE) approach to conduct the evaluation and learning process, meaning we sought to infuse an awareness of culture, context, and community, as well as critical self-reflection, throughout every step. We conducted a formative evaluation, collecting information about Kids Rank in its early-to-mid stages of growth with a focus on strengthening the program. The evaluation was a concurrent mixed methods design in which we collected both qualitative data from focus groups and quantitative data from surveys, and then brought the responses together to answer our evaluation questions, which are outlined on the next page. Data collection instruments were a Kids Rank Member pre and post survey, a parents' survey, a Kids Rank Member focus group with participatory analysis, and a staff member focus group.

Members of the Kids Rank community shaped and directed this evaluation, starting with visioning sessions that included Kids Rank members, parents, school staff, Kids Rank staff, and Kids Rank board members. The visioning sessions resulted in the direction of the evaluation and its guiding questions. Kids Rank Youth Advisory Board (YAB) members oversaw the creation of the Kids Rank Member survey materials and reviewed and contextualized the evaluation findings and recommendations from Kids Rank Member survey and focus group data.

The evaluation questions are as follows:

1. How and to what extent does Kids Rank support and help foster the social and emotional skills and mental health of its community members?
2. What is the experience of belonging to the Kids Rank community for different members (kids, parents, community partners, schools, staff)?

### Data Collection and Analysis

The table below outlines the data collection instruments, number of respondents, and data collection timeline.

Data collection instrument	Kids Rank Member surveys (pre & post; out of 73 possible respondents in grades 3 and up)		Parent Surveys		Kids Rank Member Focus Group	Kids Rank Staff Focus Group	Youth Advisory Board (YAB) Meetings
<b>Number of respondents</b>	43	37	32	25	8	5	6 YAB member attendees
<b>Timeline</b>	Jan 2022	May – Jun 2022	Jan 2022	June 2022	May 2022	July 2022	Apr 2021 Jul 2022 Sep 2022

Survey responses were analyzed by summarizing the results (descriptive statistics) and conducting statistical tests to identify any important differences in responses between pre and post responses or between groups. For the staff focus group, responses were themed and coded into categories using content analysis with the software program Dedoose. For the Kids Rank Members focus group, Kids Rank Members reviewed their responses, grouped them into larger categories in teams, then explained their themes to their peers.

## Findings

### *Q1. How and to what extent does Kids Rank support and help foster the social and emotional skills and mental health of its community members?*

While social-emotional skills items on the pre and post student surveys did not show many significant changes this year, Kids Rank Members, staff, and YAB members frequently described Kids Rank activities infused with key elements of social emotional learning, including important foundational elements for social-emotional learning (SEL) as outlined below.

#### **Kids Rank cultivates trusting relationships between Kids Rank Members and leaders**

Having just one trusted adult in a child’s life can have a profound positive effect on the child’s life, including increased engagement in school and community, better health, and prevention of risky activities and behaviors (Raney, 2019). Responding to the survey, **94% of Kids Rank Members mostly or completely agreed that they could trust adults in Kids Rank.** That high degree of trust is important to enable Kids Rank Leaders to support Kids Rank Members.

#### **Kids Rank creates space for Kids Rank Members to build strong relationships with each other**

On the survey, **81% of Kids Rank Member respondents mostly or completely agreed that they could trust other kids in Kids Rank.** YAB members emphasized that even if others in Kids Rank are not necessarily their friends, they are still likely to trust them because of their shared connection of being military kids. As one Kids Rank member explained, “I like to be around people who understand what I am going through.”

#### **Some kids might need further support to seek out help**

In response to the item “When I need help, I find someone to talk with,” Kids Rank Members who identify as girls had significantly higher agreement averages than those who identify as boys or as gender non-conforming. This discrepancy in responses suggests some Kids Rank Members may need additional support in making decisions to seek out help as a part of their own problem-solving skills.

### *Q2. What is the experience of belonging to the Kids Rank community for different members (kids, parents, staff)?*

#### Kids Rank Members’ experiences of belonging to Kids Rank

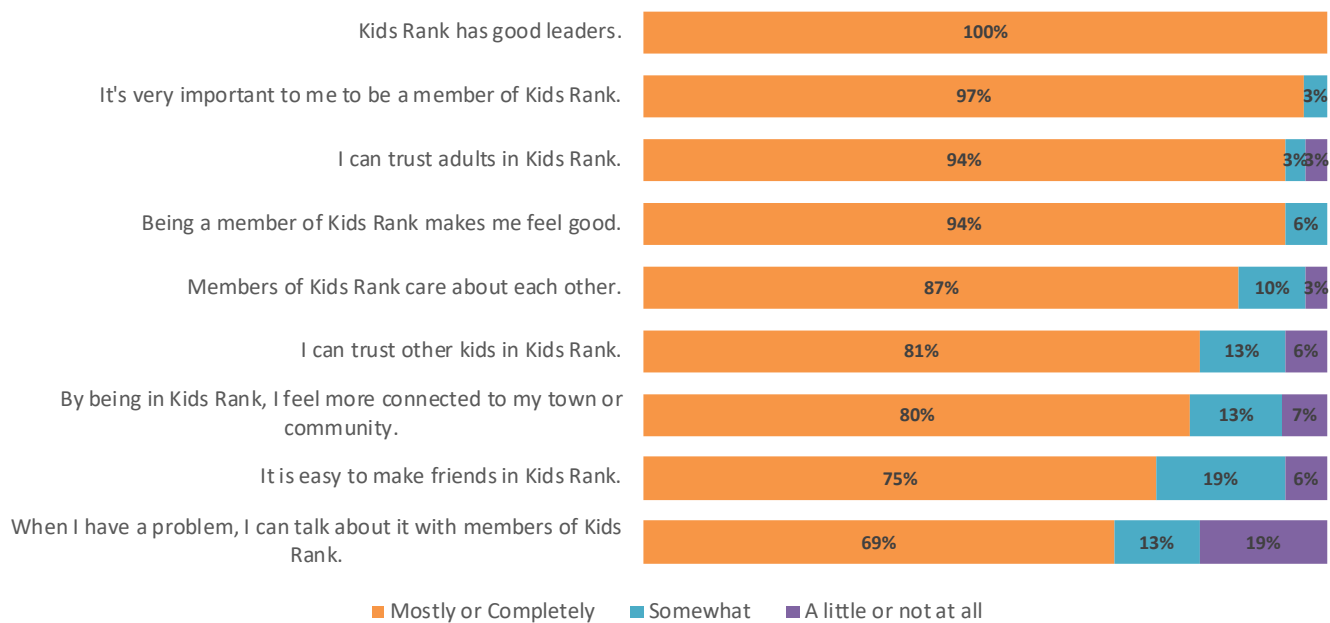
In Kids Rank Members’ May survey, they answered some questions about their experiences and their sense of belonging to the Kids Rank community. The questions spoke to the main elements (McMillian & Chavis, 1986) of belonging to a community, including, influence, reinforcement of needs, and emotional connection, which are summarized below.

“[At Kids Rank,] everyone fits in.” – Kids Rank Member

**Influence (feeling like your voice counts): Kids Rank Members feel leaders listen to them and support them to use their voices.**

Every single Kids Rank Member survey respondent agreed that Kids Rank has good leaders, which aligns with influence, or Kids Rank Members feeling that they are listened to and heard. During the focus group, Kids Rank Members said that being in Kids Rank pushed them “to talk and provided opportunities to use my voice” and “express things”. A parent also noted that Kids Rank “gives children the tools to self-advocate,” suggesting that not only are voices heard, but that children are supported to share their thoughts and needs.

Kids Rank Members like their leaders and value belonging to Kids Rank.



**Reinforcement of Needs (getting at least one thing you need from that community): Kids build skills, leadership, and a commitment to service**

94% of respondents mostly or completely agreed that being in Kids Rank makes them feel good. This strongly suggests that Kids Rank Members are finding in Kids Rank something that they feel they need and that is keeping them engaged and involved. Kids Rank Member focus group participants talked about becoming more confident through Kids Rank; gaining skills like financial knowledge, photography, entrepreneurship, and strategy; and working to be in a leadership position in Kids Rank.

For the item “When I have the opportunity, I can organize my peers to do an activity” 38% of *first year* Kids Rank respondents replied most or almost all of the time. However, 80% of *returning* Kids Rank Kids Rank Members said they could organize their peers to do an activity most of the time or almost all of the time, suggesting that **longer participation in Kids Rank increases Kids Rank Members’ skills, and confidence in their skills, to organize activities.**

**Shared Emotional Connection (a deep connection between members, in part from a shared history or participation): It is very important to Kids Rank Members to belong to Kids Rank**

97% of Kids Rank Members responded that it is mostly or completely important to them to be a member of Kids Rank. They also agreed with the statement “Members of Kids Rank care about each other,” with 87% of Kids Rank Members mostly or completely agreeing. These responses suggest a very strong shared emotional connection between members, which is not only a key element for continuing with a community but is also central to Kids Rank Members’ own social-emotional development.

**“Kids Rank is a fairy godmother until midnight [when you PCS].” – Kids Rank Member**

**Build Out More Support for PCS-ing Kids Rank Members**

One Kids Rank Member focus group participant expressed that “Kids Rank is a fairy godmother until midnight [when you PCS].” This metaphor suggests that while Kids Rank provides wonderful support for military-connected kids, once their family has to change duty stations again they are ‘back to reality’ of not having the support that military-connected children need to thrive.

Staff suggested a PCS conference for Kids Rank Members who are PCS-ing to come together, see and connect with others who are leaving so they do not feel so alone, discuss the skills they have developed that can support them in their new post, and share all that they are feeling in the process.

Experiences of Families and Staff in the Kids Rank Community

**“Kids Rank has made our 3 years in Illinois the BEST duty station my children have ever experienced.” – Kids Rank parent**

**Parents feel their families are strongly welcomed, accepted, and celebrated by Kids Rank**

Parents and caregivers, responding to survey items about their family’s sense of belonging to Kids Rank, indicated they felt their families were very welcomed, accepted, and celebrated by Kids Rank.

**100% of parent respondents said that they felt Kids Rank welcomed their family** when their child/ren joined, and that **Kids Rank is a safe space** for their child/ren.

**Staff members experiences were positive, but challenges can still arise**

Overall, during the staff focus group, paid and unpaid staff said they feel a sense of belonging at Kids Rank that they attribute to an environment where they feel heard, they feel comfortable sharing ideas and engaging in open dialogue, and feel like they are supported. Areas for improvement mentioned were internal communication, especially among interns and volunteers, and additional trainings to equip staff to better support kids dealing with complex situations.

## Conclusions

Considering the findings described in the previous section, we have concluded:

**Kids Rank is meeting a need in the community and needs to grow (carefully and intentionally) to reach and support more families.** Kids Rank is clearly successful at cultivating a sense of belonging for kids, families, and staff alike. Relationships and respect ground the organization and are instrumental to many aspects of how Kids Rank functions. While kids and parents mention the fun activities, yummy snacks, and practical skills they build, a good deal of comments from Kids Rank Members and their parents were about kids feeling understood and feeling good about themselves. If kids see Kids Rank as a fairy godmother, there needs to be a fairy godmother at every family duty station out there to support military-connected children to thrive.

**Kids Rank has built a thoughtful and proactive programming structure that supports kids' social-emotional learning and mental health. This structure is set up to expand and deepen in the coming years.** While Kids Rank Member survey results do not reflect significant increases in the social-emotional items between February and May 2022, discussions with current Kids Rank Members, YAB members, and staff reflect that the structures and programming is in place, and that young people in Kids Rank are learning from and benefitting from Kids Rank's focus on social-emotional skills and mental health. Parent surveys also showed that parents felt their kids' social-emotional skills were improving, at least in part, due to their kids' involvement with Kids Rank. Moving forward, we can track Kids Rank Members' responses to social-emotional items across years of involvement with Kids Rank, rather than months.

**Kids Rank Leaders are central to the success of Kids Rank.** Kids Rank Leaders are loved and trusted by the Kids Rank community. They provide space for kids to be themselves while also setting the boundaries of what is expected and acceptable.

**Kids Rank staff determined they can do more to support PCS-ing families before and after they move.** A big product of this evaluation has been the identification by staff that they can do more to support youth and families before and after they PCS.

**Students and staff want to lean into supporting and celebrating diverse identities in themselves and their communities.** Staff recognize that military-connected children are already at higher risk for mental and emotional challenges than their civilian peers. Those challenges could be compounded for kids experience discrimination or oppression from another aspect/s of their identities. Welcoming everyone to show up as their authentic selves is important to Kids Rank Leaders, and they have asked for more training so they can support kids even more.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are potential action items based on both formal and informal data collected and discussions with Kids Rank team members. These recommendations are not mandatory nor time-bound, but made in the spirit of recognizing and celebrating Kids Rank and the important and powerful work that Kids Rank community members are doing on personal, organizational, and community levels, and encouraging their further growth.

- ✓ **Continue questioning how to better support military-connected kids who are struggling with issues that affect their mental health and wellness**, such as PCS-ing, bullying, systemic racism, and LGBTQI self-awareness within oppressive social systems.
- ✓ Restorative justice principles center community and being in right relationship with each other and proactively building skills and relationships to promote flourishing and wellbeing. **Consider restorative justice approaches** as another entryway to difficult conversations and sharing feelings, even amongst internal team members.
- ✓ **Consider the YAB's suggestion of an optional Kids Rank Acceptance Badge** as a structure to support additional training, education, and community engagement around working with members of marginalized and oppressed communities.
- ✓ **Work at improving internal communication amongst staff, volunteers, and interns.** Strengthening communication internally will in turn strengthen external communication with families and partners.
- ✓ **Set up more formal, but with the possibility of anonymity, feedback loops** so that kids, parents, and staff have frequent opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas, provide feedback, and ask for help. It might be possible to use feedback systems as a way to coach Kids Rank Members into asking for help or reaching out to someone to talk.
- ✓ **Create a structure to stay in touch with alumni kids and families.** As more families become members of the Kids Rank community, and community expands more across the world, Kids Rank will need a formal system to stay connected with alumni as they move to new areas and connect families to each other.

This evaluation of Kids Rank’s efforts and the experiences of its community’s members have revealed a strong, beloved, and important organization that plays a powerful role in the lives of kids and their families. While Kids Rank is needed by US military families across the globe, it is reassuring that Kids Rank is growing slowly and intentionally preserving its foundational values to ensure that every child is welcomed with love and joy and invited to be their authentic selves.

