

# Applying Positive Youth Development to County 4-H Program Principles



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*This publication provides further detail of the linkages between positive youth development and the principles of 4-H. This information will help county agents with 4-H youth development responsibilities understand how to apply strategies that promote positive development within youth programs at the county level. Several examples are included.*

## **From Consumers of Services to Community Contributors**

While it is important to be cognizant of undesirable behaviors of youth, 4-H youth development agents may wish to continue local programs that focus on the strengths of youth, allowing them to use their skills. The more the focus is on positive development, the more positive outcomes young people experience. Taking a general assessment to determine the needs of the county's youth can be advantageous when designing programs. Engaging those youth and adult stakeholders in the process gives them ownership and creates a strong social support system for Extension.

Addressing those issues that are most important to communities typically gains loyalty to a program or project, thus allowing Extension to provide a service that has impact and is sustained over time. Programs that expand over a longer term have proven to demonstrate higher levels of success (e.g., mentoring) in youth than short-range programs (see Lerner, 2004; Rhodes, 2002; Roth et al., 1997).

## **Linking Individual Competency Building to Program Effectiveness**

Young people should be given meaningful roles that allow decision making; that is, those tasks that youth find challenging and exciting and not just the jobs adults do not want to do. Youth should have the opportunity to use the various skills they develop while in 4-H and other youth development programs. Many county agents use their teen volunteers in the same capacity as they would use adult volunteers. Other organizations recruit youth to serve as advocates and voting members on the board of directors. Teens are in a critical stage of their lives where they want to feel valued and should be given the chance to demonstrate their abilities. One way is to assign tasks such as teaching a lesson to younger youth, or organizing a meeting/retreat, or planning summer camp activities.

## **Enlisting Caring Adults to Promote Civic Responsibility**

The "warm and breathing" method of selecting volunteers has been a time-honored approach. If they are warm and breathing (i.e., alive and willing), then that is a creditable criterion to make

them a volunteer. Obviously, a lot more must be considered when selecting a volunteer to work with youth. One example is to consider those adults who are committed to taking the time to mentor youth and really get a joy out of doing so.

Youth need role models who are supportive, possess strong moral principles, and have an obligation to the community. Young people can only be expected to practice what they learn from others. County agents and others who work with youth should not only continue rigorous background checks but also screen to recruit those adult volunteers who demonstrate the ability to serve as positive influences in a young person's life.

Although there is a constant challenge to find suitable volunteers, some places to seek out "caring adults" would be among the families of those youth who are involved as participants, those living in the same communities as the youth, and most importantly, those who make youth feel appreciated. Individuals with these characteristics clearly have a vested interest in youth programs.

## **Inhibit Risk Factors and Enhance Protective Factors**

It's true that all youth are faced with some level of risk, but all youth are not the same. In order to reach the broadest audience, 4-H and other youth-serving organizations must continue offering a wide variety of programs that address multiple needs. Some youth in a county may have many risk factors and few protective factors or assets, while others may have just the opposite.

Although more affluent communities understandably have a greater abundance of resources, 4-H has a history of identifying those protective factors that can make a difference (e.g., committed adult volunteers, youth with strong leadership skills, meeting facilities in safe environments, age appropriate program activities) regardless of the economic status.

All youth development professionals must tap into as many protective factors as possible to promote positive development and thriving behaviors among youth. Those thriving behaviors may include:

- Success in school
- Taking on leadership responsibility

- Engaging in healthy lifestyle habits
- Helping others
- Valuing diversity

(Source: Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blythe, 2000)

As county 4-H agents and other youth development professionals work to create ways to serve youth, three general characteristics of effective youth development programs should be kept in mind:

- a) The more features of the *positive youth development* framework a program contains, the more likely it will promote positive youth outcomes.
- b) Caring youth-adult relations are critical to program effectiveness.
- c) Program sustainability is related to program effectiveness; longer-term programs that engage youth throughout the adolescent years are the most effective.

(Source: Roth, et al., 1997)

Quality programs also depend on certain settings and/or occurrences within one's environment (e.g., school climate, accessibility to community facilities, attitudes/perceptions of individuals, sustainability of services and interpersonal relationships). Features of positive settings are listed below:

## **Features of Positive Developmental Settings**

### **Physical and Psychological Safety**

- Safe and health-promoting facilities
- Safe, nonconfrontational peer group interaction

### **Supportive Relationships**

- Warmth and closeness
- Good communication between youth, adults, and peers
- Guidance from caring adults

### **Opportunities to Belong**

- Meaningful inclusion
- Social engagement
- Acceptance of multiculturalism

### **Positive Social Norms**

- Setting rules of behavior
- High expectations of participants

## Support for Efficacy/Mattering

- Practices that support autonomy and empowerment
- Providing meaningful challenges

## Opportunities for Skill Building

- Changes to learn physical and social skills
- Exposure to learning experiences
- Preparation for employment

## Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts

- Communication between school and community stakeholders
- Parental involvement in school and community-based activities

Source: Eccles & Gootman, 2002

There is no specific formula for promoting positive youth development. Each county 4-H program must develop its own unique approach to supporting and meeting the needs of the local youth. One important strategy is to educate volunteers, co-workers, other youth service



**How do we make sure that quality 4-H programs are sustainable? A few key points are listed below:**

- View development as an ongoing process.
- Allow youth to be active in their own development.
- Because development occurs in multiple directions, be mindful that youth become more diverse with age (e.g., in their thought process, experiences, emotion).
- Take into consideration that youth should be viewed as “whole persons” (socially, physically, mentally, and physically); therefore, a variety of programs should be geared toward their development in all of these areas.

Source: Adapted from Scheer, S.D. (n.d.)

providers, and elected officials on the benefits of positive youth development. Making sure these individuals and organizations are well-informed can warrant stronger programs for youth in the future.

In summary, young people have the potential to be utilized as assets. Whenever possible, they should be fully engaged in the design, implementation, and evaluation of a 4-H program or project. They are the “experts” in determining what is affecting them and, in most cases, would welcome the opportunity to partake in creating a positive experience by serving as worthy contributors to their community.

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