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## The Impact of USU Extension on Positive Youth Development

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## **The Impact of USU Extension on Positive Youth Development**

*Outcomes and Impact Quarterly: Special Edition*

Lead Contact: Dave Francis

### **Primary Critical Issue: Youth Development**

4-H programs are grounded in the belief that youth learn best by doing. Kids and teens complete hands-on projects in many educational areas including science, health, agriculture, and civic engagement. 4-H allows youth to engage in their educational interests in a positive environment where they receive guidance from adult mentors, while also being encouraged to take on proactive leadership roles. Kids can concentrate on one focus area or they can try a variety of programs throughout their 4-H experience. Major educational areas in Utah 4-H at Utah State University (USU) Extension include 4-H STEM, 4-H Healthy Living, and Civic Engagement.

4-H STEM and agriculture programs equip young people with the skills they need to find their passion and succeed in a career. Focus areas include computer science, robotics, environmental science, Agri-science, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and veterinary science. 4-H Healthy Living empowers youth to be healthy – body and mind – with the skills to make healthy decisions and lead healthy lifestyles. Having the confidence and skills to lead healthy lifestyles not only improves overall well-being, but also enables youth to tackle life’s challenges today and become leaders in their lives, careers, and communities as they grow into responsible adulthood. 4-H Civic Engagement empowers youth to be well-informed citizens who are actively engaged in their communities and the world.

Research shows that the 4-H Youth Development Program plays a special and vital role in the lives of America’s young people. Youth can thrive when presented with resources for healthy development found in families, schools, and communities - regardless of their background, socioeconomic status, race, and gender. 4-H programs launch young people into healthy and productive lives. The long-term goals of 4-H Utah are to (a) facilitate positive youth development through educational activities that foster youth competence, character, connection, caring, confidence, and contribution, and (b) empower youth to pursue their passion for successful careers and healthy life.

### **Community Gardens for Youth**

*USU Extension Faculty Contact: Melanie Dabb*

Gardening provides many benefits for youth, such as facilitating physical activity, promoting healthier eating habits, building confidence, relieving stress, helping to develop analytical abilities, and improving focus and memory (Flavin, 2016). The Wayne County 4-H program operated a community garden in the past with limited success. Encouraging youth in farming and agriculture projects has been identified as a priority by county commissioners in Wayne County (Narine, 2021). Wayne County is a rural county located in central eastern Utah. The county seat, Loa, is approximately 46 miles from Richfield, which is the nearest city with a big box or chain store and where many residents of Wayne County shop. Wayne County is geographically

isolated and has a population of 2,711 spread out over a large area of 2,466 square miles. The poverty rate is 11.2% according to the Census Bureau (2021). The USDA has designated Wayne County as a food desert with limited access to grocery stores and other resources. In response, USU Extension revived the Wayne County community garden. Seeds and plants were donated by local businesses and residents. Following, grant funds were used to provide Master Gardener Volunteer Training to a volunteer 4-H club leader to lead the garden project. The volunteer started a 4-H Cloverbud (5-8-year-old youth) garden club.

Youth in the 4-H garden club were able to grow radishes in the Wayne County community garden. Youth shared their learning experiences with facilitators, many were excited to nurture the plants and looked forward to taking the harvested radishes home to eat. Many youth were interested in learning more about the produce and were proud of their efforts. Some invited their families to the garden to show off what they did in the garden. Youth were also eager to learn more about sprouting seeds and root systems. Youth experiences in the community garden led to increased interest in local agriculture and motivation to learn more about agricultural sciences. In total, volunteers and youth provided 291 volunteer hours in the garden. Youth learned basic plant science, including what plants and seeds need to grow and thrive, useful insects, and the role of pollinators. Math skills were also incorporated into teaching since students learned about plant spacing and making the most of limited garden space. Students also learned life skills such as delayed gratification by waiting for seeds to sprout, creative problem-solving, and resilience.

Overall, parents indicated their children had increased knowledge of the sources of fruits and vegetables and had an increased understanding of the importance of eating healthy food. Parents also believed their youth ate more fruits and vegetables because of the community garden and were willing to try new foods. Evaluation results indicated youth and adults of the Wayne County Community garden had positive experiences during their participation in the community gardens. Positive outcomes include an increased sense of community belonging, knowledge of local agriculture, consumption of fruits and vegetables, and willingness to try new foods. The next step for the community garden is to create a partnership with the USU Create Better Health program and the Wayne County Food Pantry to develop a system to donate produce from the garden to the local food pantry. The Wayne County community garden represents a significant step towards community partnerships, youth agricultural literacy, and new localized food systems.

### **Adventure-Oriented Confidence Curriculum for Youth**

*USU Extension Faculty Contact: Catherine Hansen*

Youth are likely to experience different forms of adversity in their lives, including a generalized trend of spending more time inside than ever before (Cherlin, 2005; Larsen et al., 2018). These overall conditions and experiences may negatively impact the foundation on which young people build confidence, self-esteem, and resilience. Youth who have increased confidence may be better equipped to withstand adversity (Merenda, 2020). Therefore, there is a need for youth programs focused on building the confidence of youth. Utah State University (USU) Extension created a six-session curriculum called Building Confidence that seeks to increase confidence in youth. The lessons contain instruction and hands-on learning activities that focus on at least one of the following six areas of confidence (Kay & Shipman, 2014); self-confidence, self-efficacy,

connection, contribution, leadership, and teamwork. A one-time camp was held to pilot the Building Confidence curriculum.

Youth participants in the camp completed an anonymous post-camp survey that assessed their satisfaction with the camp, perceived skills, and knowledge gain. Overall, results from the survey indicated that 80% of youth enjoyed the camp, and 90% would recommend the camp to their peers. Participants also reported skill acquisition in at least one of the curriculum's focus areas (e.g., self-confidence, self-efficacy). Specifically, 80% of the participants "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that attending the camp (including workshops and high adventure activities) helped them develop one of the six core confidence characteristics. In addition, 75% of the participants "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that the lessons helped them develop at least one of the six core confidence characteristics. Additionally, results showed 75% of participants were confident in their abilities to engage in peer mentoring after taking part in the camp. Finally, evaluation findings indicated that female youth participants reported higher increases in skills and knowledge gained compared to male participants.

Evaluation data were used to guide lesson and activity revisions, as well as to inform best practices for future confidence-building training programs. The revised Building Confidence curriculum has since been disseminated to several entities, including the Utah Women in Leadership Project, Utah 4-H Discover Clubs, and Be Epic youth e-cigarette prevention program.

### **Remote Work Education for Youth**

*USU Extension Faculty Contact: Andrea Schmutz*

As more people move to urban centers in search of job opportunities, rural communities struggle to retain their workforce. In the first decade of the 21st century, the average net migration per 100 individuals in Utah was -5.8% for ages 15-19 and -38.6% for ages 20-24. There is an opportunity for rural communities to retain future workforce talent by encouraging youth involvement in remote work education through Utah State University (USU) Extension's Rural Online Initiative (ROI). To address youth migration concerns, Utah 4-H teamed up with the ROI program to create the virtual 4-H Remote Skills Camp: For College and Career Readiness. Combining learning modules, interactive workshops, and guest lectures, the 4-H Remote Skills Camp was designed to help rural youth acquire knowledge and skills in four areas: (a) remote work tools (i.e., video conferencing platforms, team messaging apps); (b) resume and portfolio building; (c) effective teamwork and collaboration; and (d) problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The 4-H Remote Skills Camp was designed for rural high-school youth aged 15-18 years old with the intent of exposing them to the concept of remote work and increasing their knowledge and skills as future remote workers.

Through observations, facilitators noted positive reactions toward peer interactions through Zoom breakout rooms, group discussions, and Slack channel messaging. This was also observed during group projects, suggesting the peer-to-peer interaction components were highlights of the camp. Facilitators also noted high levels of youth engagement during guest lectures where professional remote workers shared experiences, highlighted careers, and discussed best practices. Observed youth interactions indicated an interest in the application of technology and

the process of career development. An exit interview provided participants an opportunity to apply their knowledge of remote work skills coupled with college and career readiness skills. The interview activities included preparing a meeting agenda, creating a meeting/interview invite, and conducting a remote interview where they showcased future plans and shared feedback on their experience with the camp.

The 4-H Remote Skills Camp: For College and Career Readiness was piloted to determine whether the learning experience was effective in encouraging the development of skills relevant to remote work. Guest speakers and demonstrations led to a high level of participant interest and should be a future component of this online course. Participants also had positive reactions to group discussions about remote work careers and insights into remote work best practices.