



## Working with 4-H Youth Who Have Disabilities

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The 4-H program “promotes positive youth development by giving youth opportunities to get involved and develop to their full potential” (Samuel, J., & Rose, P., 2011). Youth and adults who choose to become involved in the 4-H program are diverse in many ways including culture, personal experiences, family structure, race, ethnicity, and personality. Such diversity among 4-H members, parents and adult volunteers provides challenges and opportunities for all involved in 4-H programs, including 4-H staff/faculty. In the case of working with youth who have mental and/or physical disabilities, a little training can go a long way in creating an atmosphere where youth feel valued and supported along the road to their full potential.

Here are a few quick tips on working with youth who have mental and/or physical disabilities.

### 1) Do your homework.

Before you start your 4-H club, look up information about the related disability. There are plenty of great resources that can provide guidance and tools to assist you in associating with individuals who have a particular disability. A few noted resources include:

- Resources from the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY)-  
[www.parentcenterhub.org/resources](http://www.parentcenterhub.org/resources)

- American Psychological Association- [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)
- My Child Without Limits- [www.mychildwithoutlimits.org](http://www.mychildwithoutlimits.org)

### Why is this important?

Many people become anxious when working with youth who have disabilities because they may be unsure, feel unprepared and sometimes even be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. Knowing more about what to expect with people who have disabilities is a great way to overcome that fear of the unknown. If you know what to expect and have a few strategies tucked away, then feelings of fear can be minimized. As they say, knowledge is power, and knowing more about a variety of disabilities gives you the power to make a positive difference in the lives of these youth.

### 2) Pair ‘em up.

Teamwork is not only an effective life skill, but it is also a great strategy when working with youth who have disabilities. Try pairing a youth who has a disability alongside a responsible peer or adult.

### Why is this important?

Some youth work great on their own and others work better in groups; it is no different with youth who have disabilities. If

a youth starts to become restless or unfocused, it may help to have some one-on-one time with a responsible peer or adult who can guide the youth in a positive direction.

### **3) Provide positive and immediate feedback.**

Many parents know that youth respond well to punishment; however, it is important to remember that youth also respond well to positive feedback. This could come in the form of verbal praise, a reward (such as a snack or tokens that can be redeemed for prizes), or even a simple smile.

Youth with disabilities tend to respond especially well to positive feedback, even when it is not directed at them. If a peer is modeling desired behavior and you immediately praise their actions, then other youth are more likely to imitate the praised behavior.

#### **Why is this important?**

Too often, youth who are deemed “disruptive” will be removed from activities and/or punished for inappropriate behavior, and yet, appropriate behavior is more likely ignored. Thus, youth easily learn what is not acceptable because they have a constant warning; youth tend to struggle with learning acceptable behavior because it rarely gets attention.

Regular positive and immediate feedback creates the repetition that some youth need in order to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

### **4) Keep it simple.**

When working with youth who have disabilities, it is helpful to break down large, multi-step activities into smaller, more manageable pieces. This may mean only giving one direction at a time. It may mean showing club members one diagram and seeing if they can complete it before moving on. That doesn't mean you should avoid a complex activity; it only means that if you do choose to present a complex activity, it may help to break it down and have the youth work at it one piece at a time.

#### **Why is this important?**

Some youth with disabilities get frustrated easily by having too many tasks put in front of them at once. It is an overwhelming experience for them, and in response, they may completely shut down and/or get verbally or physically aggressive. Breaking a task down into shorter, simpler steps allows them to focus on one detail at a time.

### **5) Re-direct negative energy.**

Sometimes, bad things happen that are out of your control. A youth may come to your 4-H meeting in a bad mood. Another youth may be upset by something someone says or does. Still another youth may just feel the urge to be mischievous that day. Whatever the circumstance, it is important to re-direct any extra energy to avoid unnecessary disruption or displays of aggression.

Negative energy can be re-directed if you:

- Ask the youth questions to steer them back to the meeting topic.
- Give them a helpful task that allows them to move around to expel physical energy.
- Provide a brief time-out.

Remember, these are just a few of the ways to re-direct negative energy. Check out the previously provided websites and other resources for more strategies.

#### **Why is this important?**

When negative energy is left to build upon itself, disruptions and aggression are inevitable. These unwanted situations can easily be avoided if you recognize anxiety, inability to sit still, frustration, and other similar signs of potential negative energy. Providing your club members with different outlets for this energy will save you both the trouble of dealing with outbursts and other distracting events.

### **6) Stimulate the senses.**

Youth and adults have at least one preferred style of learning new information. In fact, most people need a variety of mediums to help them better understand any

given topic. Using visuals, hands-on activities, audio, and other mediums that stimulate the senses readily improve the learning environment. It helps youth with and without disabilities to better grasp topics because it allows for them to become explorers of their own design.

### **Why is this important?**

If you deliver verbal instructions to youth who understand better with visuals, then you are limiting their opportunities. The same goes for only providing visuals for a hands-on learner. Youth with and without disabilities will achieve more when they have the opportunity to learn at their own pace and in their own particular style. Thus, it is more effective to use multiple mediums to help enhance the learning environment.

## **7) Patience.**

Patience is definitely a virtue. It is also a great tool to have when working with your 4-H club. Even if none of the above strategies work immediately in your situation, that does not mean you should panic. Some techniques for working with youth who have disabilities take repetition, consistency, and a substantial investment of time. So, giving up early on won't serve you well; in fact, it may leave you and your club members frustrated if you decide to give up. Although it may be difficult to persevere, patience will ultimately serve you well when working with any group of youth.

### **Why is this important?**

Being patient means remaining calm, collected, and steadfast even in the face of adversity. In any learning environment involving youth, adversity, outbursts, aggression, and stubbornness are bound to occur; thus, patience is an excellent tool to have. If you can remain calm and endure the chaos of a group of youth, you are more likely to respond in a reasonable and effective manner.

## **8) Person First.**

It is important to remember that youth with disabilities *are not* their

disabilities. They are youth first who just happen to have disabilities. Thus, it is essential to address their individual needs and avoid assuming all youth with disabilities fit under one general label or category. The resources you discover from strategy one are just a stepping stone to help you understand what challenges they *may* face and what abilities they *may* have. It is not meant to be a source that tells you exactly who they are. These youth are people first, and everything else second.

### **Why is this important?**

When we treat people as their disabilities, we assume we know who they are and treat them accordingly. This is a major problem because it creates bias, inequality, and stereotypes. As a 4-H leader, it is essential for you to treat all of your club members as individuals with unique abilities and challenges, giving them the opportunity to reach their greatest potential. It is vital to treat all of your club members as individuals and only use teaching strategies that meet their individual needs. To do this, you must do your homework, learn a few strategies, but most importantly, remember that your club members, with or without disabilities, are *people first*.

### **Now What?**

Now that you have these eight strategies to guide your future contact with 4-H youth, it is important to remember that these are not the only options. These eight strategies are guidelines, tools that you can use when teaching 4-H curriculum. If you are interested in discovering more techniques that are effective for specific disabilities, be sure to check out resources such as the ones mentioned at the beginning of this fact sheet. Remember, you may have multiple tools to increase the quality of your interactions with 4-H youth, but the most important strategy is to remember that all 4-H youth, with or without disabilities, are people first.

## References

Center for Parent Information and Resources. (Jan 2014). Retrieved August 19, 2014, from [www.parentcenterhub.org/resources](http://www.parentcenterhub.org/resources)

Samuel, J. & Rose, P. (April 2011). Essential Elements. 4-H National Headquarters Fact Sheet. Retrieved from: [http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/family/res/pdfs/Essential\\_Elements.pdf](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/family/res/pdfs/Essential_Elements.pdf)

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