



# Culturally Responsive 4-H Youth Development in Southeast Alaska

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Research shows that Alaska youth and young adults experience some of the highest rates of suicide in the nation. Recent literature about the well-being of adolescents indicates that a sense of connectedness to others is important as a protection against risky behaviors such as alcohol or drug use and suicide. It also reinforces the importance of youth programs to create youth/adult connections as likely prevention measures to address the alarming rates of youth suicide in Alaska villages.

According to research, what youth need most is someone to talk to, listen to them and guide them; they need to know that someone cares about them. This connectedness, or sense of belonging, is an essential element of 4-H. Through this sense of belonging, both within one's home village and with other youth and adults beyond the village, 4-H, provided in culturally responsive ways, could help address these issues. Within this context, suicide prevention is at the core of 4-H in remote rural Alaska. The intent is for youth to feel good about who they are, to have hope for the future and to see themselves as active participants in their future.

Diversity among villages and geographic regions in Alaska precludes a one-size-fits-all approach to 4-H youth programming. Although much can be learned from informal conversations with interested individuals, a rigorous study was needed in order to effectively situate programs across the state and, just as importantly, gather information to share with similar communities across the country. A purposeful sampling technique was used to select 10 adults to be interviewed from Southeast Alaska villages. Most of these adults grew up in the village and left to go to school. Whether they returned to the village or not, they are all now working in some way to bring services to the communities.



This fact sheet offers an overview of the respondents' thoughts and concerns. The insight and guidance shared by respondents is being used to develop 4-H programming in remote rural Alaska villages that have indicated an interest in 4-H for their youth and families. The overall questions that guided the research were: What are the needs of youth in Southeast Alaska Native villages and how can 4-H respond to these needs in culturally responsive ways? What is important, what do people value and what might a youth program look like in a small Alaska village? Interview questions addressed three areas: What are existing concerns about youth in villages? What do youth need to be healthy? What should programming look like? Several implications for program development emerged from these conversations.

## **Concerns about Youth in Villages**

Participants identified a variety of concerns, most having to do with the inactivity of youth, who have few meaningful activities in which to engage and who do not have a vision for their future. Adults

worry about the mental and physical health of their youth. They also described living situations as unhealthy when youth live in environments of alcoholism, drug use and physical and sexual abuse.

### **What Youth Need to Be Healthy**

Participants described healthy youth as having positive self-esteem, respect for self and others, being spiritual, being proud of who they are and knowing about their culture. They talked about healthy relationships and being able to trust those around them, including people in helping professions. They also believe that youth need to know about culture, language and spirituality in order to be healthy.

### **What a Program Should Look Like**

Participants said that it was important that activities be provided within the context of culture, language and spirituality to promote ethnic pride. Gardening was used as an example of a fun, culturally relevant activity: youth gain knowledge, apply skills and share the work and bounty with others in the community. It was also proposed that activities should relate to their lives and where they see themselves in the future. This is especially true for older youth. It was suggested that older youth be engaged in activities that give them a sense of purpose and vision — a sense of belonging. Older youth can develop a sense of purpose as well as leadership skills by teaching the younger kids, with the help and support of adults. This sense of belonging and purpose is necessary to successfully navigate through adolescence and envision a positive future.

In describing what a successful youth program should look like, participants spoke about the qualities of people working with youth. It is often difficult to find safe local leaders. Although they said they would like to have parents involved with what their kids are doing and to serve as positive role models, participants also referred to the challenge of making this happen. This led them to suggest that other family members or people such as teachers and principals serve as leaders. It was very evident that participants felt that youth need adults in their lives who believe in them and encourage



them. At the core of a youth program, there should be a place for kids to be safe, to be themselves and to have fun with others. In essence, youth need to know that someone cares for them. It was also proposed that youth need to feel safe enough to speak up about things going on around them. Two sub-themes emerged that provided further guidance on program development:

#### ***Fresh Perspectives***

Participants talked about gaining different perspectives as they navigated growing up in the village and leaving for school. This change in perspective had an impact on their outlook for the future as they saw a different world from that in which they had grown up. Through these stories, it became clear that recruiting outside program coordinators in response to the challenge of finding adults in local communities to take on the role of youth leader/mentor may not be a bad thing. Village youth may benefit from having fresh perspectives that are different from what they experience in small, fairly isolated environments. Healthy relationships with someone outside the village may offer youth the opportunity to see their lives from a new perspective and envision themselves taking an active role in setting goals for a future they would like to pursue.

#### ***Building Capacity for Youth Leadership***

Younger participants said that although they participated in many years of culture camps, they felt they did not know their culture. They spoke of the fear of losing their culture as elders pass on and younger adults are not learning the ways of the

elders. It is possible that many of these individuals may actually know more about their culture than they realize — it just may not be that obvious to them. In regard to building leadership capacity in villages, it may be necessary to challenge adults to think about what they do know about their culture that can be passed on to youth. This relates to the 4-H concept of youth and adults learning together. As is often observed in youth programs, a lot of adult development takes place in concert with youth development. An integral component of tribal 4-H is to provide encouragement and mentoring of family and other adults to increase their sense of self-worth in order for them to feel successful in mentoring youth.

### Recommendations for Practice

The following are recommendations for what 4-H programming should look like in Southeast Alaska based upon this study:

- Plan activities within the context of culture, language and spirituality to promote ethnic pride.
- Include physical fitness and activities that promote healthy lifestyles.
- Engage youth in fun, hands-on, short-term activities to keep their interest.
- Invite and encourage youth and adults to learn together.
- Include information about being safe and dealing with abuse.
- Offer activities that relate to youths' lives and where they see themselves in the future. This is especially true for older youth.
- Engage youth in activities that give them a sense of purpose and vision — a sense of belonging.
- Ensure that adult leaders are safe and supportive.
- Provide mentoring and support for adult leaders.

- Strive to involve adults from the village or nearby villages so that appropriate cultural, spiritual and language values can be taught.
- If it is challenging to identify local residents, bring in outside facilitators to build capacity through involvement and mentoring of local adults and older youth.
- Sustain programming with partnerships and collaborations; even an hour of fun once a week on a consistent basis can add to the health of a child.

These recommendations contribute to the essential elements of 4-H positive youth development:

- A sense of belonging — feeling connected to others and having a sense of place within the world; opportunities for youth to feel safe actively participating in a group, and opportunities for long-term relationships with caring adults. This sense of belonging may be the single most powerful element in the lives of youth.
- Independence — opportunities to make decisions and have one's voice heard; opportunities for leadership to learn self-discipline and responsibility leading to a better understanding of self and others.
- Mastery — opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills learned help youth develop self-confidence and experience success. 4-H projects offer safe space for youth to make mistakes and learn from them in protective, supportive environments. These skills prepare them for career and life choices.
- Generosity — helping others provides a sense of purpose and meaning. Youth connect to their community and give back to others through community service.

These essential elements reflect values of Native American youth development based on the medicine wheel, described by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Bockern in their book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*, as well as traditional values of Alaska.





## Conclusion

All participants expressed their desire for youth to enjoy childhood and adolescence and grow up happy and healthy. They believe that it is time to step up to the responsibility of providing healthier environments for youth and that change must start from within their communities. They are concerned about high rates of suicide, child abuse and domestic violence. As they talked openly of these issues, it was clear that they hoped that solutions will be forthcoming and there will be a better future for their youth, families and communities.

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