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Youth/Adult Partnerships: Tips for Success

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The core of 4-H is shared leadership of adult volunteers and youth members. Youth development is an inevitable process, and can be positive or negative depending on influences to which youth are exposed. Positive youth development provides youth with safe, stable places to learn marketable skills, and offers relationships with caring adults who provide nurturing, guidance, and opportunities for trying new roles, dealing with challenges, and contributing to family and community. Caring adults who value the participation and decision-making abilities of youth must take an active role in their communities.

Youth in partnership with adults provides an excellent opportunity for them to develop and exercise leadership skills while contributing to social change in their communities. Whether in the local club setting or in county or city councils, this engagement provides a safe and constructive forum for positive youth development. Adults may not be comfortable working with youth in leadership roles, mainly because it may not have been the norm in organizations in which they have been involved. Keep the following ideas in mind as you develop a comfort level in shared youth and adult partnerships:

- Share the responsibility for leadership. Provide guidance, but avoid total control.
- Listen carefully and try to understand the issue from a youth perspective; ask questions.
- Provide meaningful roles and assignments for youth – not “busy” work.
- Share all work activities, even tedious ones.
- Treat youth as equals and develop a partner relationship. Don’t expect more from youth than you would from an adult, and don’t excuse their actions just because they are youth.
- Treat each youth as an individual and don’t generalize about all youth from the actions of one. One person cannot represent all people of that age group, ethnic background, etc.
- Be careful about interrupting. When interrupted by an adult, youth may tend to stop talking with the reasoning that adults don’t care about what they think or feel.
- Keep youth informed about activities, even when problems arise. They need to be involved in all levels of the project/program.
- Be energetic and excited about activities. Maintain a positive, open attitude.
- Make activities fun and challenging, and provide “youth friendly” refreshments – having youth input will help with this.
- Be clear about levels of authority for youth and support their decisions when they fall within the agreed upon guidelines.
- Serve as a role model for youth, and be consistent and fair in your actions. Remember that your role in the partnership is not to serve as a parent. You are providing youth with a different way to relate to adults.
- Offer carpool ideas for meetings/special events.
- Provide an opportunity to “hang out” and socialize before or after the meeting.
- Provide training as you prepare youth for roles (e.g., officer training).
- Provide mentors – an excellent way for both age groups to understand the best ways to work with each other.
- Try to attain an equal mix of youth and adults. At the least, begin by inviting youth to serve with at least one other youth – they need someone else close to their own age to relate to, especially in a room full of adults.
- Validate ideas shared by both age groups.
- Be willing to try new ideas, even if previous experience has said it may not work.
- Slow down – explain reasons for actions being taken. Just as if you were dealing with new adults on

the council/committee, rushing through a meeting can be a sign that you are trying to control the actions of the group.

- Be sensitive to reluctance of both youth and adults to serve as recorder in front of a group. Some may be self-conscious about spelling or handwriting. Ask for volunteers, and make it clear that correct spelling is not necessary – recording ideas is the key.
- Rotate leadership and facilitator roles in the meetings. Everyone, youth and adults, should get a chance to try out all of the roles – an excellent “on the job” experience.
- Try having separate youth and adult meetings every now and then. These are sometimes helpful in gauging progress and comfort level. Be sure to update each other.
- Keep meetings short and take breaks as necessary.
- Make sure meetings lead to action. Why come to a meeting if there is just “talk?” Consider keeping an action log to determine what needs to be done, who will do it, and by when.
- Avoid using language that is hard to understand, including technical terms and acronyms (avoid using “Extensionese”). Make sure everyone understands it’s okay to ask if something is not clear.
- Make time for FUN.



Especially for youth:

- Listen carefully and try to understand the issue from an adult perspective; ask questions.
- Sometimes when an adult criticizes an idea or action, they are treating you the same as they would treat another adult. Just because they don’t agree with you, doesn’t mean they are dismissing you altogether.
- Many adults may not know what to expect of youth council/committee members. Show them through your actions, that you are just as capable of contributing to the group’s goals.
- Adults will feel responsible for the success or failure of a project/program. This is one reason it may be difficult for them to share authority.
- Adults are just as uncertain as you are, they’ve just learned to disguise it better. Work alongside each other and make decisions together.

Sources:

Promoting Youth Participation, Action Kit for Municipal Leaders, National League of Cities, Institute for Youth, Education, and Families www.nlc.org

Broadening the Bounds of Youth Development: Youth as Engaged Citizens, Ford Foundation & The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2001.

Additional Sources for further reading:

National 4-H Council (1997). Creating Youth/Adult Partnerships (130 page curriculum).

<http://www.theinnovationcenter.org>

Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, A Division of National 4-H Council. At the Table: Youth Voices in Decision Making (discussion guide and video),

<http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/> (contains a good listing of Youth/Adult Partnership resources, some of which are available online, or www.AtTheTable.org

Activism 2000 Project www.youthactivism.com

Building Teens for Better Communities, Nan Booth, Kendra Wells, Mary Ellen Waltemire, Sherman Tomasino: August 2000, Institute for Governmental Service, University of Maryland, College Park, in cooperation with Maryland Cooperative Extension, www.inform.umd.edu/igs

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