



Teen Leadership and Development Fact Sheets:

Preparing Teens for Opportunities Beyond the Local Level

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Virginia 4-H offers a wide variety of opportunities beyond the local level that enable teens to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and aspirations needed for success. However, before we involve teens in opportunities such as State 4-H Cabinet, State 4-H Congress, Virginia 4-H All Stars, Citizenship Washington Focus, National 4-H Congress, and National 4-H Conference, we — as 4-H professionals — must be sure the teens are adequately prepared for such ventures. This fact sheet provides tips on how to prepare your teens for district, state, national, and international 4-H opportunities.

- Communication/public speaking
- Teamwork
- Open-mindedness
- Ability to lead
- Responsibility
- Problem-solving
- Decision-making
- Critical thinking
- Accepting of others
- Goal setting

Having Confidence and Setting High Standards

Adults working with teens should regularly express their confidence in the teens’ abilities. Realizing that conquering difficult tasks builds confidence and fosters persistence, push teens to improve their weaknesses and step outside their comfort zones. Adults should also have high expectations of the teens with whom they work. These expectations should be regularly expressed, and regular, consistent encouragement should be provided to show teens that you are committed to their success. Encourage teens to set high standards for themselves. Reassure them that they are capable of achieving greatness.

Know Your Teens’ Skill Sets

In order to successfully pair teens with opportunities beyond the local level, you must first know what they are capable of and their skill sets. The following checklist identifies some of the skills teens will need for 4-H opportunities beyond the local level.

Be Excited!

Teach with gusto and demonstrate your enthusiasm for your work. Teenagers will follow your example. If you’re positive and excited, your teens will be positive and excited. There are a number of approaches to developing strong working relationships between teens and adults. Because one mission of 4-H is to develop youth leadership and life skills, we want to choose the methods that are best suited to encouraging development of professional attitudes and behaviors. Once an effective method has been selected, we must understand how to create programs based on that model and then how to maintain the partnership created.

In order to select the best method and hopefully obtain the best outcomes by using that method, we must

understand how each approach affects the participants. A “continuum of youth-adult leadership,” developed by Jones and Perkins (2005) at Pennsylvania State University, describes five levels of interaction between youth and adults: adult-centered leadership, adult-led collaboration, youth-adult partnerships, youth-led collaboration, and youth-centered leadership. The levels of youth and adult participation vary inversely across the continuum. Each level is explored briefly to help determine which approach best suits the goals of Virginia 4-H.

1. **Adult-centered leadership** – Organizations that are planned and led by adults. The youth serve only as participants with no voice in planning or evaluation. Formal education is the most prominent form of this style, but many community youth organizations also fall into this category because they do not ask for youth input in regard to the program design.
2. **Adult-led collaboration** – Similarly, in adult-led collaboration situations, adults are the driving force of the program and have most of the power. However, there tends to be greater camaraderie between youth and adults, and the opinions of the youth are sought and incorporated into the program design. Examples of this leadership style include mentoring and community activities where adult leaders may provide a list of activity options from which youth can choose.
3. **Youth-adult partnerships** – In youth-adult partnerships, both groups have equal decision-making power. The emphasis in this program is on learning from one another through participation. Examples of this form include the Virginia 4-H State Cabinet and other collaborative efforts between youth and adult organizations.
4. **Youth-led collaboration** – Youth develop the ideas and make decisions with limited support from adults in youth-led collaboration models. Adults most commonly assist with securing funding and equipment or personnel for large activities. Organizations that function largely with youth leadership teams, perhaps by brainstorming, selecting, and leading fundraisers or community service projects, are examples of this leadership style.

5. **Youth-centered leadership** – The final level is youth-centered leadership, which is led almost exclusively by the youth. There is little to no adult involvement, resulting in unstructured environments. Though this form is often affiliated with gang formation, it may also be exhibited by something as innocent as the organization of an informal sports game after school.

Keep Up to Date

Keep up to date with all district, state, national, and international opportunities available to teens. If you are knowledgeable about the various opportunities, you will be better prepared and equipped to advertise these events to your teens and answer any questions they may have. If you lack knowledge of the events, you are likely to not advertise the opportunities. To learn more about 4-H opportunities beyond the local level, check out the 4-H Events Web page at www.4-h.ext.vt.edu/events/index.html.

Don't Be Afraid to Get Your Hands Dirty

Adults play a key role in supporting youth involvement. This is not an opportunity for us to stand by and watch. We must be involved in helping create safe spaces and structures that help youth in the process of becoming full partners. Think for a moment: How do you assess your present level of thinking about or working with young people (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Thoughts on working with youth.

The first step to creating a successful relationship with teens is to remember that attitude is key! According to the “spectrum of attitudes” developed by Lofquist (1989), there are three major attitudes possessed by adults in relation to youth.

1. Youth as objects – Adults with this view believe that young people have little to contribute and strive to keep them in a relatively powerless position. This results in a lack of involvement by youth and, therefore, a lack of youth development.
2. Youth as recipients – Because decision-making will be good for the youth, adults with this viewpoint allow them to “practice” decision-making in highly controlled situations in which they cannot make serious mistakes, usually about activities that are trivial or very easy. Though this seems to be positive, it actually has little benefit to the youth because they do not have practice making more difficult decisions with realistic consequences.
3. Youth as partners – In contrast, when adults respect young people as significant contributors and encourage youth involvement, they are displaying the “youth as partners” attitude. If both parties see the strengths and contributions of the other, both groups can benefit equitably from the experiences. No matter how young or inexperienced the youth, they still possess opinions, unique ideas, and enthusiasm that can be extremely valuable to the group.

In conclusion, in order to increase teen participation in 4-H opportunities beyond the local level, we must make them aware, encourage them, and support their involvement. Without your assistance, they may never branch out beyond the local level. If you are unfamiliar with the details of opportunities offered beyond the local level, please don’t hesitate to consult with the Virginia 4-H office or with colleagues within your district.

References

- Jones, K. R., and D. F. Perkins. 2005. “Youth-Adult Partnerships.” In *Applied Developmental Science: An Encyclopedia of Research, Policies and Programs*, edited by C. B. Fisher and R. M. Lerner, 1159-63. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE.
- Lofquist, W. A. 1989. *The Technology of Prevention Workbook: A Leadership Development Program*. Resource Guide for Workshop Participants. Tucson, Ariz.: AYD.