



Teen Leadership and Development Fact Sheets: Recruitment and Retention of Teens

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Often, society hears negative reports related to teens — for example, 51 percent cheated on a test in the last year (Josephson Institute of Ethics 2012) — and the lack of positive opportunities provided for teens contributes to these statistics. Research shows that when teens are engaged in long-term, positive opportunities with caring adults, they are more likely to be academically productive in high school and to graduate (Lerner et al. 2011). 4-H Youth Development provides the longitudinal opportunities and caring adults who promote positive outcomes for teens. However, the recruitment and retention of teen 4-H members is often difficult because of family and community factors. While these factors may inhibit positive teen opportunities, there are other factors that can help overcome the barriers.

Developing a Strong Foundation

In Virginia, senior teen 4-H membership begins at age 14; however, strong teen programming begins with youth in the middle school (ages 11-13) or earlier years (ages 9-10).

- Middle schoolers, by development, are “joiners” and are, at the same time, beginning to develop independence from their parents (Elmer and Jamison 2007).
- Effective 4-H programmers use strong clubs, after-school programs, ongoing school enrichment programs, and camp opportunities.
- Through membership, youth develop a sense of belonging and have caring, nurturing adults to help guide them toward their interests (Lerner et al. 2011).

With strong middle school building blocks at the base of 4-H teen development, youth are able to channel their interests, skills, and ideas in a goal-setting struc-

ture. Not all youth have a strong middle school background, but those who are late bloomers or late joiners view the opportunities provided to their peers as productive and jump on the bandwagon to belong to something successful. Youth enjoy a sense of belonging and often develop life skills in waves or groups. Keeping these middle schoolers together, retaining them through their high school years, and further engaging them are the ultimate goals.

Valuing Teens’ Time

In order to feel like their time is well-spent, teens need to see, feel, and experience the value of the teen program. By the age of 14, youth begin to use their individual identities. As teens, they no longer just want to “join”; they want to feel as if they are using their time and talents. Often, teens are forced to choose among work, academic challenges such as advanced placement and/or dual-enrollment classes, and athletic team participation. Strong 4-H teen programs use the small window of time that youth have available for 4-H by providing valid activities and events to allow youth to

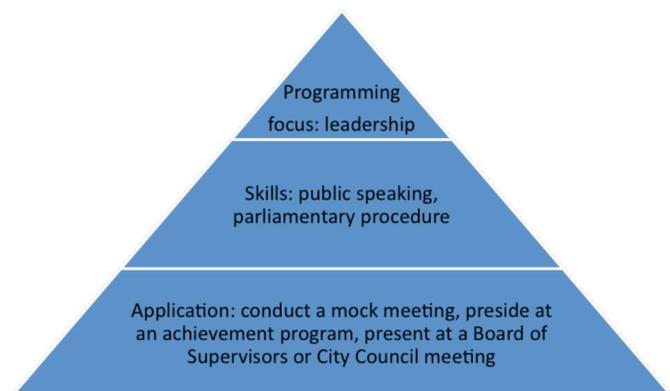


Figure 1. Example of the progression of the program focus to practical application.

develop and practice life skills. 4-H leaders and agents who invest in the youth (get involved, engaged, and interested in their other extracurricular or academic programs) find that the youth are more likely to invest in the 4-H program as well. This sense of valuing the teens' time and talents relates to caring, nurturing adults leading a program (Lerner et al. 2011). Youth programmers need to be cognizant of the teens' available time by focusing on skills that are practical; in turn, youth appreciate this practical application of these skills (fig. 1). Those who work with youth must organize their focus and provide opportunities for teens to apply the skills they have learned. Youth want to feel that their time has been spent wisely and that they have progressed in their development.

Communicating the Value of the 4-H Program

Once youth feel their time is being used in an appropriate manner, the adult must communicate the value of the 4-H program — also known as “what 4-H can offer.” Teens enjoy being around other teens, so a strong program allows social interaction while meeting 4-H club or group goals. One of the best ways to promote social interaction is participating in community service projects. Community service allows youth to give back

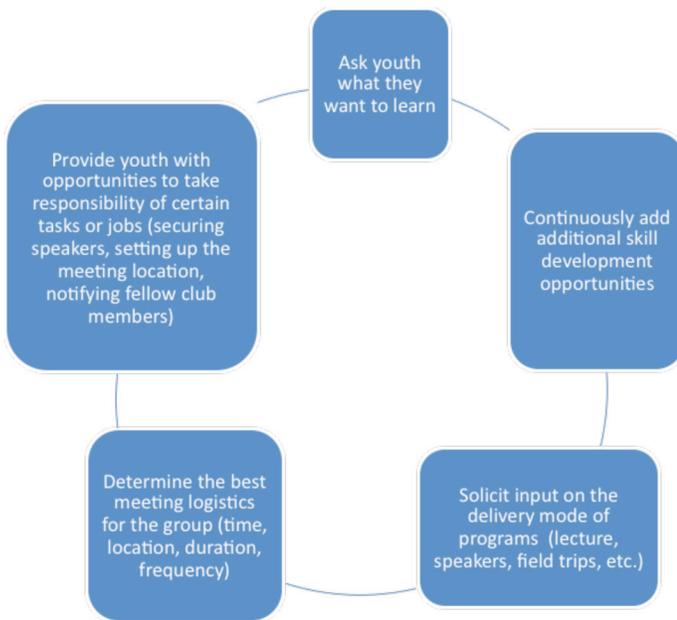


Figure 2. Simple tips that can be implemented by creating participant buy-in.

to their communities while developing and practicing skills in planning, goal-setting, implementation, and evaluation. Teens need to be treated as individuals, and they should be given meaningful roles (Simpson 2001).

From the soft skills (team building, relationship building, public speaking, decision-making) developed in these projects, youth become young community leaders preparing them (the youth) for other aspirations, such as workforce development, work-study positions, internships, and furthering their education. Teens should be allowed to follow their new passions, use humor, and develop intellectual thought (Simpson 2001). Strong teen programs not only promote skill development, but teens find participating to be fun and want to continue. Allowing teens to have a voice in the direction of the program creates a sense of ownership and buy-in by the youth. Educators must find ways to implement and use their input by creating an environment for youth buy-in (fig. 2).

Recognition and Encouragement of Teens

While not all teens want to be singled out and recognized for their achievements, it is important to encourage and appreciate them for their 4-H work. Adults working with 4-H need to thank teens and recognize and acknowledge their areas of interest, skills, strengths, and accomplishments (Simpson 2001). Serving as teen leaders and mentors to younger members allows teens to use their skills and to be recognized among their peers. This type of recognition promotes responsibility, respect, and trustworthiness. Knowing what type of recognition motivates teens is paramount in a successful program. Some teens appreciate a personal call (or text) recognizing them for their success in a recent project or extending a personal invitation for them to participate in a new program or event.

Pairing Teens With Community Leaders

Strong 4-H programs find avenues for youth to be visible in the community and to positively influence others. The influence may be through civic engagement, volunteerism, or organized instruction. When adults model decision-making, reasoning, and critical thinking skills, youth feel more comfortable developing their own

skills (Ricketts and Rudd 2002). Further, when teens and a trusted adult have a goal, they have the opportunity to experience real learning (Appleman 2010).

When a community has a negative image of teens based on stereotypes, youth/adult partnerships can be a positive voice in improving this image. Simpson's (2001, p. 16) research concurs and states, "There is clear evidence that, when we put our minds to it, teens and adults together can turn around these trends."

Focusing on Teens' Talents

Not all youth have equal or similar skills and talents. Actually, their divergent skills contribute to a well-rounded program. Promoting and focusing on the talents of the youth not only diversifies the program, it also recognizes them in subtle ways. One way to begin focusing on their talents is to create an interest survey. Finding areas of interest that are comfortable for them promotes an easy introduction for youth development beyond their comfort zone. Youth are more likely to enjoy an activity and be less intimidated when challenged when working in areas of their interest. Remember to start with youth at their current level of expertise and interest and move with them at their individual pace of development.

Conclusion

Successful 4-H programs have developed avenues to constantly recruit as well as to maintain strong teen leaders. Youth need to feel personally valued and to feel that their time invested in 4-H is a worthwhile endeavor. Pairing youth with caring adults enhances teen leadership skill development. When mentored by community leaders, youth become civically engaged and responsible within their own communities.

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