Navigating Communication Across Generations

Many of us remember when the primary method of communicating with others was to write a letter or pick up our home telephone and make a call. For some, e-mail was difficult to learn at first. However, for most adults e-mail is a common tool used in the workplace, to communicate with friends and family, or to use for sending information or sharing pictures. For teens, these methods of communication are used primarily to communicate with adults. For communication with other teens, it's a different story.

Communicating with Teens

The lives of most teens revolves around time spent online, is always changing and involves different methods of communicating that are unfamiliar to many adults. Technology has become the norm in communication for most teens as text messaging, instant messaging, and sharing of information on social networking sites rivals in-person communication. Teens live in a world filled with different types of communication technologies. The internet and cell phones have become an integral part of their daily lives (Lehnart, Madden, & Hilton, 2005). Most teens will send a text message to a friend before they pick up the phone to call them. Facebook and MySpace are two of the more popular social networking sites used by teens. These and other sites are used to send messages to friends, share pictures, bulletins and blogs, and have become a place where teens can create and share their own online personality.

Staying Connected with Teens

It is a benefit for 4-H leaders who work with teens to be aware of the many different communication technologies used by teens. Becoming familiar with the many different methods teens use to communicate and share information can help adult leaders better understand the complex world of teen communication and lead to a better working relationship. A "connected" adult can work more effectively with teens and help them make proper online decisions, as well as help them become better offline communicators. 4-H leaders should understand that the exact communication technologies used by teens may change but the need to communicate online and instantaneously will not.

- Be familiar with the methods teen 4-H'ers use to communicate with their friends. A 4-H leader does not need to develop their own MySpace or Facebook page but should be well aware of the positive and negative aspects of these sites and other methods of communication used by teens.

- Develop expectations for teens at meetings and events. In many instances, talking during meetings is now replaced with text messaging during meetings. Be sure that the same behavior standards are being used regardless of the method of communication. Explain to teens that cell phones should be turned off or put on silent during meetings.

- Make teens aware of the consequences of sharing too much information or posting inappropriate comments or photos on a public site. Many youth have hundreds of "friends" online and will accept complete strangers as their online friends. Some may indicate that they never communicate with people they don't know online, but they will post their complete address and cell phone number, which can be accessed by anyone. They may not be aware of or thoroughly understand the consequences of posting their personal information. Despite the age requirement for these sites, many younger teens will create their pages and develop a persona different from their actual age. Some

may also provide through their "online status", a detailed description of exactly where they are such as, "at 4-H from 6-9 then at Stacey's house." These online safety issues can be discussed individually with teens or be used for a general discussion at a club meeting. Leaders may want to invite an expert on internet safety, such as a sheriff's officer, to a club meeting to speak to youth or parents on this subject.

- 4-H leaders can find positive ways to use social networking sites for use by 4-H clubs. A 4-H leader, young adult leader or older teen can start a 4-H online group specifically for communication among club teen leaders. Blogs, monitored chat rooms, and safe networking sites can be used by teen groups to communicate and share information, but should be monitored by an adult. Be sure that only approved members are invited to join groups or post items and that all youth connected to the site do not have inappropriate material linked to their site. Be sure teens understand the expectations of being included in these groups.

- As a 4-H adult leader participating with online social networking sites, be sure to use these sites wisely as a role model for youth. Make sure your information, pictures, and postings are all appropriate for viewing by 4-H members. If they are not, maintain separate sites for your friends and for the teens in your program. Be sure not to accept teens as "friends" if they have inappropriate material on their site. Being connected to teens through these sites can be helpful to build and preserve communication but needs to be used appropriately.

The methods teens use to communicate with their friends continue to change and evolve. Teens have access to instantaneous communication with friends they may rarely see in person and are able to use multiple communication styles at one time. For many adults, this is difficult to comprehend. By developing an understanding of how and why teens communicate as they do, a 4-H leader can have a better working relationship with the teens in their clubs.

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References

Lenhart, A., Madden, M., Macgill, A. & Smith, A. (2005, July). Teens and Technology, *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, retrieved from http://pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf.

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