



Working with Limited Resource Families and Youth

For many young people, participation in extracurricular activities is not an option because of economic issues, limited opportunities in the neighborhood, or other family issues. Compared to 90% of youth from higher income families, only 73% of children from low income families participate in extracurricular activities.

But, 4-H programs can be especially beneficial to youth from limited resource families. Participation in extracurricular activities encourages personal accomplishment and develops social skills. For adolescents, these activities offer an opportunity to take on meaningful roles and responsibilities. The sense of self-worth gained from these experiences can be an important protective factor for children growing up under difficult conditions.

To have the opportunity to work with limited resource families, however, 4-H must first reach them. Understanding the issues limited resource families experience is the first step in reaching youth from these families.

Understanding the Audience

It is important to note, when learning about the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of any audience, over-generalizing and/or stereotyping is a potential negative outcome. Generalizations can help guide our own behaviors, especially when in new situations. Stereotypes are typically negative and difficult to change. Keeping in mind individual differences, applying generalizations carefully can be helpful in developing activities and working with all youth.

Basic Needs

Families with limited resources are struggling to meet basic needs of housing, safety, health care, adequate nutrition, and often, child care. Although all families can say they have trouble of some sort at any one time, the realities of the life shaped by poverty cannot compare – even if attempting to treat all members equally. Failing to recognize this greater degree of difficulty destroys trust between the adult volunteer and the limited-resource member and family.

Education

Statistically, low income people have a high school diploma or lower, while research has shown that the more advanced the degree, the greater the salary. Past failures in school are major barriers of parental support to participation in youth education programs. Unlike middle-class participants who have experienced success and satisfaction in education, limited-resource adults typically do not promote participation in educational programs because it represents another potential opportunity for failure.

Single Parent Families

Poor children are more likely to live in single parent homes than in homes with two parents. Because one-parent families typically rely on a lone adult for economic support, the family income is lower. There may also be greater stress on family interactions with only one parent raising the child(ren).



Low Self-Esteem

Past successes and failures go hand-in-hand with self-esteem. Living in poverty may cause feelings of failure and doubts of ever escaping. Low self-esteem leads to feeling powerless over their lives. Consequently, educational programs can be unattractive because of failures in school.

Fear of Change

People, especially youth, need to live in a predictable world. Trying new things or going to new places can represent a risk of failure for the limited resource audience.

Transportation

Limited resource families are less likely to have personal transportation. This can be a barrier to participation in meetings and activities.

What the 4-H Club Has to Offer

Limited resource youth face greater at-risk issues than other youth. Fortunately, research shows that young people who have protective factors in their lives are more likely to have abilities to overcome problems in their lives. The nature of 4-H youth development programming and the structure of the 4-H club provide many protective factors.

Builds Life Skills

With more emphasis on process and individual learning, youth in 4-H clubs progress at their own rate. 4-H members get the chance to practice what they can do and what they've learned many times in different situations. In addition, members learn from mistakes. Achievements in 4-H project areas build skills that will often help the young person feel more confident.

Sense of Belonging

The 4-H club can provide the single place where a young person feels s/he has something in common with others. The supportive atmosphere develops positive relationships with adults and peers, and youth feel safe – both physically and emotionally. 4-H clubs provide on-going participation that is stable and relatively long lasting.

Supportive Relationships

Most 4-H members will agree that the number one best thing about 4-H is the friends you make. 4-H members and leaders form a connectedness, have good communication, care for and support each other, and are responsive to one another's needs.

Self-Esteem

4-H activities engage young people in useful and meaningful roles as officers, committee members, presenters, and exhibitors. It provides opportunities to practice self-determination and goal setting for the future.

Health & Safety

The 4-H Code of Conduct communicates clear behavior rules and consequences that encourage positive behavior, habits, practices, and healthy attitudes.



Recognition

Everyone wants recognition in some form. 4-H provides many opportunities for recognition – at the club, county, state, and national level.

Hands-On Learning

4-H club project work involves learning activities that are interactive, reflective, and engage multiple learning styles. 4-H club project work provides real and challenging experiences that youth can apply to daily lives. Expanding young people's experiences through field trips, community service, community and cultural activities, and socializing are all part of the 4-H club experience.

Strengthen Supports

4-H engages parents and encourages their active participation which can strengthen family relationships and supports. 4-H club work also supports and encourages the attitude that young people can help to change community norms or attitudes, strengthening a belief in community service.

Implications for 4-H Volunteers

It is important for 4-H volunteers to keep in mind such barriers as single parenting, health and safety issues, limited education and income, and societal prejudices that may affect efforts working with youth from limited resource families and the 4-H club program.

Attendance

Families struggling with economic or other disadvantages often have unpredictable problems on a regular basis. Attendance may be inconsistent. Help the 4-H member in making up meetings to fulfill attendance requirements. Be sure to include all club members in deciding how missed meetings can be made up. Some examples include conducting a club project activity, volunteering for a county-wide 4-H event like Public Presentations, or giving a talk for a local service group.

Transportation

Transportation is always an issue with young people but can be more of an issue with those from low income families. Assist the 4-H member in making carpool arrangements by linking with another member that lives close by. Be sure to approach parents of both members first, as this could be a sensitive issue.

If possible, arrange meetings within walking distance or near public transportation to help anyone with transportation problems.

Active Parent Participation

Active participation by a single parent is typically more limited than with two parent families. In some limited resource families, the parent(s) may work more than one part-time job. To encourage participation, plan events and activities early enough to give parent(s) time to plan and schedule work, transportation, or other arrangements. As with anyone, be respectful and remember that good communication is essential.



Recognition

Offer positive feedback to provide encouragement and help improve skills. Be generous with praise and encouragement, but be certain your remarks are sincere. Recognize achievements or progress with club honors, county level award recommendations, or other honors available.

Mentor

One approach that is proving successful in improving school attendance, school performance, increasing protective factors, and decreasing risk factors is mentoring.

- Start a Mentor Project in your club allowing older or experienced members to be mentors to younger or new members. The mentors can provide one-on-one encouragement and help in setting and achieving project goals.
- 4-H volunteers can serve as mentors to members. Be careful not to create the appearance that only limited resource members are being mentored; young people are very aware of grouping and labeling based on their school experiences.

Fundraisers Instead of Dues or Supply Responsibilities

If your club collects dues to purchase 4-H project activity supplies, to go on field trips, or to purchase matching t-shirts for the Fair, you may want to consider running fundraisers for these things. If your club usually asks a member, or members, on a rotating or assigned basis to bring the supplies for the next meeting's activities, a fundraiser might also be a good alternative if you know of any members that might not have the resources.

Written by Deborah L. Cole.

References

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