



4-H for Youth with Special Needs

Approximately 6.7 million school-aged children in the United States have disabilities. Involving “special needs” youth in 4-H can result in a satisfying experience for all involved.

Defining Youth with Special Needs

Special needs youth include children with a wide range of disabilities, that is, limitations on their ability to perform certain skills. Common disabilities include physical, mental, and developmental disabilities such as Attention Deficit Disorder, Autism, and Down’s Syndrome.

Mainstreaming is Rewarding for All

“Mainstreaming” in the 4-H program means to involve youth with special needs in the same clubs, events and programs as youth without special needs. 4-H educational programs are provided to all youth alike in a non-segregated, inclusive manner. All 4-H participants are provided with the same opportunities to develop life skills as they complete projects and participate in 4-H events **together**. This results in a rewarding experience for all, as:

- 4-H members with disabilities develop a sense of self-confidence and self-reliance as they successfully interact with other youth and participate in 4-H activities.
- 4-H members without disabilities learn that youth with special needs are not so different and begin to see that each individual, disabled or not, has strengths and weaknesses, as well as unique abilities.
- 4-H leaders and volunteers learn new skills and techniques for working with special needs youth and become more comfortable with people who they may perceive to be different.

Involving Youth with Special Needs

Involving special needs youth in your club or activity may take some special consideration but can be quite easy if you follow these steps:

- *Learn about and help other 4-H’ers understand the disability with respect for the child’s feelings and preference for privacy.* This can be accomplished by talking to the child’s parents, researching on-line or at the library, contacting local support of advocacy groups (i.e., Muscular Dystrophy Association, etc.), or attending local Special Olympics, where you can see how trained volunteers work with a variety of children with special needs.
- *Find out how the disability affects the particular child with whom you are working.* Remember that each child with a disability is still a unique individual. This means that different children with the same disability may display a varying range of characteristics. Talk with the parents to become familiar with the child’s ability levels, special challenges, and other individual needs.
- *Modify the project or activity to match the ability level of the child.* For example, a child in a wheel chair could participate in a gardening project by designing a raised garden bed or participating in container gardening. Modification



may also mean modifying program requirements. For example, in an animal science project, youth without a disability may be required to take care of the animals on their own, while a special needs child may be paired with a teen leader or older 4-H members for assistance through team work. Look at the objectives of the project or activity, and help the child set reachable goals to meet the objectives. The child should be involved in the setting of the goals and the adaptation of the program as much as possible. The modifications to the program must be designed to meet the child's ability levels and the goals of the project while still challenging the child to consistently improve his or her own personal best. The important factor here is to focus on the similarities among special needs youth and not to concentrate on the differences. All youth have a basic need to belong and to feel accepted by the group.

- *Additional specific leader training/support.* Help with learning about and understanding appropriate accommodations and educational resources is available through the county 4-H office.

Special Needs Guidelines

Here are some guidelines to remember when working with special needs youth:

- Involve the child and his/her parents, as much as possible, in setting goals and modifying the program to meet the child's needs.
- Treat each child, special needs or not, as an individual who has certain talents, skills, strengths, and needs.
- Provide plenty of recognition and positive reinforcement. Make sure your expectations for each child are based on efforts made toward reaching a set goal. Don't be "easier" on a special needs child just because of the disability.
- Remember that the 4-H motto, "To Make the Best Better!" does not always mean blue ribbons and other awards. Personal growth (ability to handle frustration or communicate better), gaining and using new knowledge (planting and taking care of a garden), and feelings of accomplishment (succeeding in any new challenge, no matter how small it may seem) are also important accomplishments.
- Take the time to learn, and to teach other 4-H'ers, the correct terminology for the child's disability, as well as any equipment which the child may use. Sometimes the common terms are considered insensitive or rude.
- Many people with physical disabilities would prefer to discuss their disability rather than have everyone ignore it or pretend not to see it. How this is handled should be determined by consulting the child and his/her parents.
- Differentiate the areas where the child's abilities are diminished or different and where they are "normal." For example, people often shout at visually impaired people as if they also cannot hear. Don't assume anything about a child's disability; remember that each child is an individual.
- With mainstreaming in schools becoming a common practice, today's youth often have a greater awareness, understanding and comfort zone in interacting with their special needs peers than in the past. Usually the fact that a child is "different" ceases to be a problem for the other children in a group long before the adults reach the same comfort level.



Ready for Success

Working with special needs youth requires some extra attention, time, and flexibility. However both volunteer leaders and 4-H'ers alike will find many rewards. The most important reward is the chance to make new friendships, take part in fun and satisfying shared experiences, and to learn to value each individual for the unique and special person he/she is.

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References

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Schnepf, G., Tormoehlen, R. and Field, W. (1992) A Perfect Fit - 4-H Involvement for Youth with Disabilities, Cooperative Extension Service of Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, 69 pages.



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