



Working with Teen Leaders

Many 4-H teens want to become leaders in the 4-H program so they can:

- share what they know,
- learn new skills, or
- assume new responsibilities.

In many counties, you will find teens as teen leaders of 4-H clubs with adults, as summer camp counselors, as 4-H fair division chairs, as well as leading county events and being role models for 4-H youth.

As the adult partner in one of these leadership experiences, you can provide the direction and support that will help the teens reach their goals with a feeling of success. Teen leaders may discover their new leadership opportunities through their own 4-H club, the county teen council or as part of a county event committee, such as the fair, awards event, or public presentations.

Teen leaders should be encouraged to document their leadership experience using the 4-H Teen Leadership Record Book. The record book can serve as a conversation starter between you and your teen leader. As a mentor, you can provide guidance and support as your teen leader develops goals and a plan of action for their leadership project.

Who is Eligible?

Youth enrolled in grades 8–13 are eligible to become teen leaders. They are selected (by adult volunteers) because of their interest in or knowledge of the projects of the club and their desire to develop leadership skills. They are usually good teachers and enjoy working with children.

Teens involved in a county teen council are also considered teen leaders. In addition to working with younger members, they also concentrate on designing their own programs and working cooperatively to accomplish goals as a group of teen leaders.

What Can a Teen Leader Do?

Teens can take responsibility for many tasks such as :

- assisting club leader with communication to members,
- organizing a club business meeting,
- teaching members specific project material or skills,
- leading recreational activities,
- organizing portions of a county event,
- designing and implementing a community service project, and
- assisting club leaders with club recruitment.

Since each teen leader has unique interests and abilities, duties will be customized and vary from person to person.



What Supervision is Needed?

Teens are encouraged to take on as much responsibility and authority as they can comfortably handle, but they must never be left alone with the children. An appointed 4-H leader must be present at all times. The adult leader may be in an adjoining room or working with a nearby group of youngsters, but must be handy and supervise the activities of the total group.

What are Some Skills I Could Use?

- *Build a positive relationship by getting to know each other.* No matter what the task, it's best to start by getting to know both the teen's strengths as well as any area where skills will need to be developed. You, as the adult partner and mentor, can encourage trust by sharing which skills you will bring to the team.

Some teen leaders will have as much experience with the 4-H club activities as the adult. Others may need a lot of orientation to this new situation. By getting to know each other, exchange of ideas and suggestions can begin.

- *Welcome new ideas.* Encourage new ideas and the teen leader's development by asking questions such as: "Have you ever done that before or is this something new you would like to try?" "How would you carry that out?" "What effect do you think that would have on the club members?" "What kind of assistance would you need?" "What things might not work as planned and what would you do?"
- *Avoid negative phrases such as, "We don't do it that way," and "That won't work!"* Focus on creating enthusiasm and energy in the partnership. When the teen suggests something that has been a failure in your past experience, look for a piece of it that can be incorporated into another method so that the teen feels included in the decision-making process and you feel confident as the coach.
- *Share responsibilities.* Plan each person's role in each meeting: who will make announcements, who will lead recreation, who will advise the officers of new developments, etc. Advance planning and discussion of each step while planning will prevent the automatic dominance of either leader.

Consider the needs of the club as well as the needs and interests of the leaders when planning. Neither partner, teen nor adult, wants to feel that tasks were dropped on them for which they are not prepared.

The teens you coach can grow into great leaders by learning new skills, testing their limits and abilities, and discovering how to handle challenging responsibilities. As teen leaders mature, they can be given increasing responsibility and independence. The timing of each additional duty should be decided cooperatively by both teen and adult leaders.

- *Delegate.* Delegation has two elements—responsibility and authority. Ideally, the elements are both assigned to the same person. When delegation is used properly, one person (often the teen leader) is given responsibility for a task and the authority to implement or direct it.
- Acknowledge the parts that were done well before making criticisms. Be positive and look for the good first!

If you as the adult leader find it difficult to transfer authority to a teen leader, check to see if your planning is thorough. When carefully planned and implemented, sharing responsibilities can become a growth opportunity for the teen leaders and a liberating experience for you.



When transferring responsibility to a teen, it is important for you to choose words that form a request rather than an order. By considering each opportunity from the teen leader's perspective, you will easily delegate in a way that shows respect for the teen's feelings and abilities.

- *Support each other.* As coach and mentor, you should tell members you expect them to listen, follow directions, and cooperate with the teen leader. The teen leader is responsible for generating some of this respect but needs your consistent support.

As the adult volunteer you may quietly support ideas and suggestions made during club discussions or project enthusiasm for the projects of the teen leaders. You can also serve as backup for unanticipated occurrences. As you demonstrate these support skills to the teen, you may discover similar support being provided for you by the teen.

Celebrate Your Success as an Effective Team

Congratulate each other on each step of progress made and goals achieved. Take time to celebrate the success of your club and also your partnership. Thank each other for support and assistance given. Then start to make plans for meeting the next challenge.

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 *Did You Know...* 

Urban club work is not new—it was reported as early as 1906.
City clubs were active during World War I.
Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) funding became available to provide 4-H nutrition programs in urban areas in 1969, and funding later included urban gardening.

For more information on New Jersey 4-H, please visit www.nj4h.rutgers.edu.

Cooperating Agencies: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and County Boards of Chosen Freeholders. Rutgers Cooperative Extension, a unit of the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, is an equal opportunity program provider and employer.