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Adult Development
Preparing Adults for the Youth Development Experience

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Quality programming, positive social interactions, skill development and a host of other factors play key roles in guiding youth on a smooth transition through adolescence. The dedication of committed, caring adults is crucial in ensuring that other essential elements are attainable. Given the long-term social ties formed between youth and adults within families and youth programs, it is safe to assume that *adults* are in need of development as well. Many of them, despite their motivation to work with youth, are not equipped to tackle the complex issues that affect young lives. They need training that will help them identify and provide what is necessary to promote positive development within the youth they encounter.

Youth face a flux of changes from birth through the teen years, and adults must determine how to balance youth independence with the support they need. Parents are busy attempting to adjust to the ever-changing relationships they have with their children. Youth practitioners are working hard to meet complicated demands through high-quality programs that maintain interest and are meaningful at multiple stages of development. Both parents and youth workers are in search of youth development professionals who can help them acquire the skills to better understand, relate to and work effectively with today's youth.

This publication offers tips to 4-H youth development agents who train adults (staff or volunteers) to work with young people. It also provides information on how to plan programs that employ youth and adults working together within communities.

Youth-Adult Relationships

Development is a collective social change process shared by both youth and supportive adults. *Adult development* is a strategy to help adults acquire the skills to build stronger intergenerational relationships, with emphasis on adults partnering effectively with youth in the community. Youth-adult collaborations may be formed to implement a particular project, but it is important for adults to serve as allies throughout the youth development process. Communities must have these relationships in place, not only to promote change but to establish the levels of trust that must exist between youth and adults.

Adults have a major role in creating successful youth-adult relationships that are embraced by today's youth culture. Whether they are parents, teachers, case workers, or mentors, adults must learn and understand the needs of youth, as well as the routines that affect their lives. Adults must be aware of social, emotional and physical needs and understand the steps required to establish meaningful relationships that build trust. By far, those adults who can reflect on meaningful adult development experiences tend to respect youth voice, solicit and value youth opinions and respond in a non-judgmental manner.

Key Components of Adult Development

- Challenges the notion that development ends after the teen years

- Acknowledges how the lifelong experiences of adults can be used to improve the lives of today's youth

- Recognizes the skills and talents required to provide youth with those experiences that ensure positive youth development

- Incorporates the common principles of volunteer development with the concept of empowering adults to maximize opportunities throughout the youth development process

- Considers the concepts of community youth development, including serving as a community builder by identifying and utilizing the strengths of young people

- Helps adults pull from their life experiences as adolescents when considering programs that aim to develop the whole child (i.e., socially, emotionally, physically)

An Ongoing Process of Experiential Learning

Usually the challenge for most adults working with youth is not a lack of passion for youth development work. In most instances, adults are not well-versed in youth development principles and current practices and are confined to a limited worldview of today's young person. Adults do not always readily recall the days of their youth or reflect on how life was as a teen. Many of them may have been exposed to stressful teen years that they do not wish to revisit mentally and emotionally. Many adults have problems working with youth because they identify with youth only by remembering their personal, troublesome past. They see youth as needing to be saved from all harm and danger and treat them as if they have no experiences of their own. Because of this disconnect, adults often have difficulty identifying successful youth development strategies for today.

Many adults volunteer because they care about youth, but they are impeded by the fact that they have no formal training on how to deal with the issues affecting children or teens. From situations at home to concerns at school, youth are bound to have problematic episodes that require the attention of adults. Yet only a few colleges and universities offer degrees or certification in the youth development academic discipline, so most of these skills are crafted in non-formal settings not accessible to everyone. Only a few youth-serving agencies and organizations (such as 4-H) have the capacity to adequately train both workforce and volunteers using models that promote adult development.

To form youth-adult partnerships, develop quality programs and offer positive youth development, adults must adopt a worldview that encourages self-exploration. Adults who learn to reflect on their own lives can meet youth where they are before addressing the issues that affect developmental outcomes. The practice of adult development urges a shift from viewing adulthood as a final product after adolescence to seeing it as an ongoing process of experiential learning that affords adults the liberty to pull from their knowledge to connect better with young people.

This approach demands personal transformation on the part of adults to form effective relationships with youth and ultimately promote change within communities.

Practices That Support Adult Development

The role of 4-H agents and other youth development professionals is critical in helping young people reach maturity with the skills they need to be successful in life. The following practices will help adults prepare so that they can assist in facilitating this process.

- Keep in mind the many positive and negative encounters that can occur throughout the teen years. Although negative situations can remind one what not to do (i.e., repeating mistakes), adults who consider the positive experiences they had as youth can strive to make sure young people they encounter have the same opportunities.

- Host volunteer training opportunities that enhance attitudes and behaviors of adults. Adult development is more than just increasing knowledge and skills; it includes intentionally forming a new mindset and a different way of doing things (in hopes of getting desired results).

- Offer ongoing training through in-services or regularly scheduled volunteer sessions at the county level. With the ages and stages of today's youth so varied and with youth culture changing at an unpredictable pace, adults must be proactive in preparing to support their children and/or those they work with in schools and communities.

- Provide venues for open communication between youth and adults. Adult development allows adults to be in touch with positive and negative experiences and declare a willingness to show a vulnerable side. Adults opening up to youth helps build trust, thus allowing youth to feel comfortable expressing themselves to adults.

- Provide forums and events for adults to network; for example, county extension offices, social gatherings at local sites (community centers, schools, faith-based institutions), or in conjunction with youth-focused events.

- Offer experiences that provide adults with the skills to help youth reach the level of competency necessary to become productive citizens (one of the major reasons 4-H stresses the importance of youth-adult partnerships).

- Help adults understand, support and collaborate with young leaders. Adult development requires 4-H youth development agents to pay close attention to the social, economic and cultural issues that affect the community and to determine what adult volunteers, teachers and parents need to become effective in aligning themselves with youth to mobilize community efforts.

- Hold discussions about what is going well and what areas need improvement within a youth program or project. Feedback from both adult volunteers and youth can provide valuable insight.

- Focus on common issues that are of particular interest to both youth and adults and identify topics, projects and programs that generate the same level of passion for everyone involved.

- Identify the generational and environment tensions that can affect the goals of adult development. Environmental tensions are quality of life issues shaped by conditions in the community (poverty, unemployment for youth, violence, teen pregnancy). Generational tensions arise when adults cannot identify with the culture of today's youth and youth feel that adults are out of touch with reality. Volunteer training methods must integrate approaches that deal with such issues.

High standards must remain in place to ensure that youth remain a priority and that adults have training opportunities that will allow them to be the best at what they do—parent, teach, mentor, and support the next generation. Such strategies are vital in taking the youth development field to the next level.

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