

Section 7: Working with Teens

If you will be working with teen members for the first time, you may be wondering what to expect - from them and from yourself! Do you have what it takes, that "magic touch," that keeps teens active, interested and cooperative?

This section will focus on teen development and the importance of building a relationship. Also included are: tips for motivating teens, planning programs and overcoming the logistics barriers.

Developing a relationship with your teens is the most important thing that you can do. How you value the energy, ideas and input of your teen members comes across in your language, questions and actions. As you might expect, a caring and respectful adult who listens to ideas and has high expectations has a much better chance at success than one who is disrespectful and expects the worst.

How do you really feel about teenagers? Take a few moments to assess where you are by reviewing the Anonymous Leader Survey that follows. Being aware of your current attitudes will help you to strategically think about how you want to work with teens.



TEN TIPS FOR WORKING WITH YOUTH

1. Share the responsibility for leadership. Provide guidelines, but avoid total control.
2. Listen carefully to youth and try to understand their perspective.
3. Provide meaningful roles and assignments for youth.
4. Share all work activities, even tedious ones.
5. Treat young people as equals and develop a partnering relationship.
6. Keep youth informed about activities, even when problems occur.
7. Be energetic and excited about activities.
8. Have a positive, open attitude.
9. Make activities fun and challenging.
10. Be clear about levels of authority for youth and back their decisions when they fall within the agreed-upon guidelines.
11. Serve as a role model and be consistent and fair in your actions.

LEADER SELF SURVEY

Answer these questions to get a better feeling for your own attitudes about working with teens. This is a personal survey.

1. Teens have unique perspectives and knowledge that would enhance our club's capacity and efforts.

1
strongly disagree

2
undecided

3
strongly agree

2. Our club leaders should invest more time in working with teens.

1
strongly disagree

2
undecided

3
strongly agree

3. Teens are reliable and should be trusted.

1
strongly disagree

2
undecided

3
strongly agree

4. Teens should have the opportunity to lead younger 4-H members.

1
strongly disagree

2
undecided

3
strongly agree

5. Our club should adjust certain meeting times to accommodate teens' schedules.

1
strongly disagree

2
undecided

3
strongly agree

6. Even if teens are not involved with all of our club projects, it is important to take the time to work with them.

1
strongly disagree

2
undecided

3
strongly agree

*Source: Activism 2000 Project * www.youthactivism.com*

If you responded "strongly disagree" to some questions, please read on. There are ways to work with teens that could change your opinion entirely.

How do you communicate respect to teens?

Following are a few ideas:

Take them seriously and avoid sharing your judgments. Adolescents need to be seen as mature, unique people -- equal to adults in their worth and dignity. Unfortunately, some adults tend to brush off what adolescents are going through with comments like "it's only puppy love" or "you're just going through a stage." Instead of trivializing teenagers' experiences and feelings, or sharing your opinion, make an effort to listen.

Keep in mind, teenagers are not children. Teenagers are changing in many ways - physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially, so adults need to change the way they interact with teens. One of the most degrading things a parent, teacher or another adult can do is treat teenagers like children.

Treat teens the way you expect to be treated. Adolescents have much to offer - provided they are given a chance. One way is simply to ask for their opinions and suggestions - and then pay attention to what they have to say. You should also demonstrate respect for teenagers by extending basic courtesies instead of issuing orders, demands and ultimatums.

Recognize their talents, abilities and efforts. Instead of assuming teens already know when they've done a good job, give them specific feedback and tell them that their contributions and actions are appreciated. Teens live in a terribly competitive world. Sometimes they feel that no matter what they do, it's just not good enough.

Teenagers need positive adult role models. Teenagers look up to adults whom they like and respect. Such adults are usually respectful to teens and are fair and consistent in their own actions. Remember that when it comes to influencing teenagers, the things you say probably aren't as important as the things you do.

Sharing your expectations and power with teens can provide leadership opportunities for teens and fewer discipline problems. Teens need and want opportunities to assume responsibility for their actions. There are ways to offer guidance and support that will encourage success without coming across as being controlling. Here are some strategies:

Provide clear messages. Expectations, boundaries and consequences need to be carefully explained and discussed. Even the things that seem obvious to you may not be obvious to your teens. When adolescents challenge the rules and expectations set for them, help them by negotiating and discussing new limits and consequences.

Consider the amount of control you use. Teenagers need to gain experience thinking and choosing for themselves. Expecting your orders to be carried out

simply because “I said so” is setting the stage for trouble. Instead, provide expectations for expanded roles and boundaries - then step back.

Understand the difference between discipline and punishment. While young people need greater responsibility, they also need structure that adults can provide. So leaders and parents must be able to follow through with discipline strategies that help teens learn from the mistakes they make, rather than punish them.

Sources: Small, Stephen A. and Day Patricia M. What Teenagers Need from Parents, Teachers and Other Adults. Cooperative Extensions Service. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. (Taken from Moving Ahead Together); Asset Building for the Success of All our Youth, Town of Perinton, Village of Fairport, Fairport Central School District

Planning and communication

Working with teens requires creative methods for communication and planning. Here are a few ideas to try:

Use technology: E-mail, texting, blogs, discussion boards, three-way calling, social media etc. can help you stay connected. Your teens can tell you their preferred method of communication and can help you become acclimated to the technology.

Plan your program and stick to it: It helps to schedule meeting dates at the beginning of the club year because of the busy schedules of teen members. Include as many county and state events as possible, so that your teens and their families can schedule accordingly. Because schedules change, be flexible and willing to change.

Meet when it is convenient and conducive for your teens. This may mean evening meetings will work best, or that you plan to meet around after-school jobs.

Check with your teens on their expectations. Have a meeting with your teens to discuss their ideas, expectations, needs and boundaries. The table below is full of ideas developed by teens for other teens.

DOs & DON'Ts for working with adults (a list developed by teens)

DOs

- **DO** ..Check your expectations before initiating a project or program—what do you expect from it?
- **DO** ..Ask for information about the organization or project: How would you fit into the process? What would your responsibilities be?
- **DO** ..Address “youthism:” What are your stereotypes about working with adults? What will you have to do to communicate effectively?
- **DO** ..Develop your skills so that you feel comfortable participating. Open yourself to learning!
- **DO** ..Make an effort to really listen.
- **DO** ..Respect the views and experiences of others.

DON'Ts

- DON'T ...Hesitate to ask questions
- DON'T ...Hesitate to be creative, energetic, and enthusiastic.
- DON'T ...Assume all adults will treat you like your parents treat you.
- DON'T ...Over commit yourself!

Advice to young people from adults (a list developed by teens)

- Be on time.
- Come prepared to participate - read any notes or minutes before meetings, note any questions about your role, learn more about the organization or project.
- Focus on the purpose during meetings and activities.
- Take your role and commitments seriously.
- Listen a lot at first to get a sense of how the group/organization functions and explore ways that you can best contribute.
- Don't expect to understand all that you hear - - but make sure to ask questions!

Source: National 4-H Youth Directions Council, National 4-H Conference 2001

For more information about working with teens, see the fact sheet "Positive Youth Development Resources: Informative Web Sites" on the 4-H Web page.

Special events and opportunities

Statewide, 4-H Youth Development offers a wide variety of opportunities for young people to become involved in everything from career exploration to citizenship to science and technology. For more information, check out the State 4-H website (www.cce.cornell.edu/4h/) or review the following list of annual events:

Events (listed by date):

Capital Days (March; Albany): A two-day visit to the state capital to tour, learn about history and state government. Participants will also have an opportunity to meet with their state representatives.

National 4-H Conference (March or April; National 4-H Center Chevy Chase, MD): Youth and adults work together to run this conference, which will include seven to nine New York members.

4-H Dairy Discovery (April - for 4-H'ers 15-17): Hands on educational sessions challenge participants to consider the many diverse and exciting career opportunities within the dairy industry. Applications due February 15. There is a small cost for each trip.

State Teen Ambassador Training (April; State Fairgrounds, Syracuse, NY): This three-day training is for every level of teen ambassador and advisor. The training is designed to offer practice in public speaking; debate and personal conduct speaking with decision makers.

Career Explorations (June; Cornell): 350 teens from across the state attend this three-day adventure on campus. Learn about Cornell campus life, department programs and meet others from across the state. Career Explorations offers a program, called Focus for Teens, focused on areas of interest for teens in 10-12 grade and a less intense program, called University U, for teens entering 8 & 9th grade. Registration is in April.

Statewide Presentation Program (June; Cornell; ages 13 and older): Districts choose their top three public speakers and one alternate for each presentation area. For more information, please visit the State 4-H website (www.cce.cornell.edu/4H/).

State Fair (August; Syracuse): State Fair is an opportunity for fun, leadership and learning. There are many ways for teens to be involved in State Fair. To name just a few:

- **Junior Superintendents:** Teens selected to work the entire State Fair, coordinating animal shows and the youth building.
- **Teen Leaders:** Some 500 Teen Leaders annually at State Fair. Teen Leaders work six hours a day in programs like: Press Corps, Teen Evaluators, Fashion Review, Welcome Booth.
- **Group Action:** This includes clubs demonstrating a specific project in a county booth.
- **County Booth:** Some Teen Leaders work specifically in their county booth, assisting evaluators in finding items in their booth, keep things tidy, answering questions and in some cases providing hands-on activities.



Agri-Business Career Conference (October; Cobleskill College): A collaborative effort of Farm Bureau, Cobleskill College and Cornell Cooperative Extension, The Agri-Business Career (ABC) Conference introduces teens to a vast variety of opportunities available in the field of Agriculture. Open to teens across the state.

Annual Opportunities (listed by alphabetical order):

4-H Residential Camps: This provides great opportunities for social, personal, and educational growth within a natural environment. For more information on 4-H camps in your county, please look on the web at:

<http://www.4hcampsny.org>

Citizen Washington Focus: This is a 4-H leadership program for youth, ages 15-19, from across the country. For more information look on the web at:

<http://www.cwf.n4h.org/>

In-state Exchange: A less expensive, but equally as rewarding, alternative to out of state exchanges. County teens make arrangements to visit another county, generally staying in homes, visiting areas of local interest. A web page is being put together on our state web site that will facilitate exchanges. (is this web page already up?)

<http://www.cce.cornell.edu/4h/>

Out of state exchanges: Information about out of state exchanges is available at:

<http://www.states4hexchange.org>

Wonders of Washington: This is not an event, but a trip that your teen group can schedule at the National 4-H Center in Chevy Chase, MD. Tours are scheduled and facilitated by Center staff.

<http://www.4hcenter.org>

Leadership Opportunities: While trips are fun, there are also many other opportunities to get involved in 4-H.

- 4-H Statewide Teen Advisors
- 4-H Foundation Representative
- 4-H State Fair Advisory Committee
- Technology Leadership Team

Collegiate 4H - go to

<http://nys4h.cce.cornell.edu/get%20involved/Pages/Collegiate4-H.aspx>

Additional References

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Forum for Youth Investment (Karen Pittman)

<http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org>

Vermont Agency for Human Services (2000)

<http://www.ahs.state.vt.us/whtwks/wwProPosYthDev.pdf>