Teenage Youth at Risk Explore 4-H

The Situation
The Jerome Juvenile Justice Department indicated that as many as 85% of the juveniles in their program are not involved in positive group activities. Since 4-H is an excellent group activity program, the Jerome Extension staff saw the opportunity to reach these youth and expand their future potential. By encouraging teens in the Juvenile program to get involved in 4-H and learn valuable life skills, we are hoping to keep them involved in positive group activities and continue on to be contributing members of the community. We would like to teach these youth how to utilize their time doing positive activities for after school fun, instead of activities that lead to trouble. Helping them to become productive citizens in the community is our long-term goal.

Our Response
A recent survey of 4-H clubs illustrates the importance of encouraging as many youth as possible within our community to become involved in 4-H. The survey was completed in 1998 (n=3198) and showed that youth who actively participate in 4-H for one year or more, had more of the following assets and/or skills than youth not participating in 4-H: leadership, conflict resolution, communication, self-confidence, ability to make healthy choices, knowledge of nutrition and food safety, and record keeping (Rodriguez et. al., 1999).

We planned and conducted group activities on Tuesdays and Thursdays for juvenile teens from April 25 through May 25, 2000. Youth completed Handmade Pottery and Dutch Oven Cooking 4-H projects. The classes lasted 1 1/2 hours after school with the teens being able to take home something they made, or eat a meal they made from the dutch ovens. They also participated in hands-on fly tying activities, as part of the Sport Fishing 4-H project. The instructors for the classes were three adult volunteers and two 4-H teen leaders.

The Results
Through completion of the Handmade Pottery and Dutch Oven Cooking 4-H projects, and learning about fly tying, the youth were learning and experiencing a variety of life skills without even knowing it. Some of those life skills included critical thinking, decision making, learning to learn, problem solving,
time management, positive social interaction, communication, cooperation, sharing, team work, personal safety and self-esteem.

To illustrate the impact these activities and subsequent enrollment in 4-H can have on youth, we can look at current research results. **Rodriguez, et. al., found that youth who participate in club activities had higher quantities of developmental assets than youth without club participation.** These assets included educational aspiration, achievement, motivation, the desire to help others, school grades, self-esteem, decision making, the importance of having a value system, level of interaction and communication with adults, and the ability to make friends. Furthermore, Rodriguez et. al. referenced a 1996 study by Benson of 5,235 students in grades 7, 8, 10 and 11. *Benson’s study showed a relationship between developmental assets and risk behaviors that held for both boys and girls across racial and ethnic categories.* Benson’s study found if a young person had 0 to 10 assets, they were four times more likely to use illicit drugs and five times more likely to engage in violence. Conversely, with 31 to 40 assets, a young person was much more likely to have good health and do well in school. As evidenced by this research, increasing youth developmental assets within our community is very important.

Ten juvenile teens participated in the 4-H activities. There were eight youth that completed both 4-H projects and the fly tying activities. Comments from the teens indicated they had no idea about the diversity of activities that were possible in dutch ovens, such as making cookies and pizza in dutch ovens. The teens surprised themselves at how much they could do, and that these fun activities were 4-H projects. One teen thought that 4-H was “just sewing and pigs.” Another teen response was that these projects were “way cool.” The teens loved gaining self-confidence and knowledge. It was very obvious working with and watching them, that they did not have these types of opportunities in their daily lives. Reed Crozier with the Juvenile Justice Department said, “the youth lack self-initiative and would not have completed the projects without the Extension Office providing these opportunities.”

There were two participants that showed additional interest in hand building pottery. One of these students told her art teacher at school about the 4-H pottery project. The teacher suggested that she continue in the art class with pottery and show the others what she had learned. **She was very excited that she knew something that most of the people in her class did not know.** She continued with pottery in school and did many other projects and reported this at every meeting. The other student was interested in learning more about other opportunities to take classes and career options. She gathered information about taking classes at the College of Southern Idaho and searched the Internet regarding career opportunities in art.

The juvenile teens being responsible to come on time for the classes and actively participate in individual and group activities provided a framework they were lacking. 4-H teen leaders teaching them about Dutch Oven Cooking provided good leadership models to follow. As an added benefit the teens were able to see the school resource officer as a person/cook, not just a strict authority figure. The school resource officer is also a volunteer 4-H leader who taught the dutch oven project with the two teen 4-H leaders. Gaining respect for adults, and being able to talk to them, is very important for the Juvenile youth.

The Lincoln County 4-H leader who taught the Handmade Pottery classes spoke with the teens regarding youth camps and teen opportunities through 4-H. The juvenile teens were amazed at all the opportunities that 4-H had to offer. However, several students remarked that they did not have the family support to maintain a group activity that required a set time commitment and money. This indicates the need for our Extension office to continue offering positive learning alternatives for these and other youth in our community. The majority of the teens said that they would be interested in participating in other 4-H project classes next year. Continuing to enhance youth life skills and developmental assets will have lasting effects on lives.
The Future
We plan to continue working with the Juvenile Justice Department each year to promote the image of 4-H and have youth involved in positive hands-on activities. Each year we will diversify project activities to promote and add variety to our 4-H program, and keep youth interest levels high.

References
http://www.cce.cornell.edu/4h/educationalresources/ final_report.rtf

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