Canyon County 4-H Reaches Out to Younger Teens

The Situation
The 4-H Youth Development Program offers activities for youth from five through 18. Canyon County 4-H enrollment data show that the majority of 4-H members are in the second through seventh grades. After seventh grade, 4-H enrollment decreases by as much as 40 percent. Some of this decline is attributable to after school, school enrichment, and camping programs that are targeted for elementary school-aged youth, but many youth drop out of their community 4-H clubs after the seventh grade because they are bored with the club program. Although emerging data from a national study of 4-H participation show that junior high school-aged youth drop out of 4-H at a lower rate than from other youth development programs (Lerner, 2006), there is still a drop in participation, which reduces the ability of the program to have an impact on young people when they may most need positive direction in their lives.

There are many opportunities for teenage 4-H members beginning in the eighth grade, but some community club leaders do not promote or even inform youth of these opportunities. Teen 4-H activities are very well-received by those who attend and are designed to continue to teach teenagers life skills they will need to make a successful transition to adulthood.

Our Response
Every spring, Idaho sends a delegation of teenage 4-H members to National 4-H Conference in the Washington, D.C. area. The conference encourages the delegates to identify issues of concern to teens and to form an action plan to address the issue in their home state. In 2006, the delegation chose to address the issue of declining 4-H enrollment among junior high school-age youth. The delegation’s solution was to work with a local Extension Educator to implement a program for this age group.

4-H members build gliders in the aerospace workshop at the Canyon County BLAST Junior High Retreat.
The delegation chaperone worked with the 4-H Extension Educator in Canyon County to develop the idea for a junior high overnight retreat for sixth and seventh grade 4-H members. The goals of the retreat were: encourage continued 4-H enrollment, explore new project areas, learn about teen opportunities, and to make new friends. A planning committee made up of youth in the seventh through twelfth grades and 4-H leaders was formed to plan and conduct the retreat. The retreat was entitled the BLAST Junior High Overnighther and advertised with flyers, phone calls, and advertisements in the county 4-H newsletter.

The retreat program included seven one-hour workshops on 4-H project areas like aerospace, heritage arts, foods, animal science, service learning, art, and technology education. Teens played get acquainted and team building games, sang around a campfire, and participated in activities throughout the night and morning. Forty-two youth participated in the program.

**Program Outcomes**
The retreat was evaluated with a questionnaire asking youth to rate the retreat on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the highest). Five questions were designed to measure the effectiveness of the retreat to meet the goals. Youth were asked to rate their feelings before the retreat and again after the retreat.

All five questions received better responses after the retreat than before the retreat, suggesting that the retreat had a positive impact on the youth. For example, youth were asked their agreement with the statement, “I am excited about the cool things teens can do in 4-H.” Their answers changed from an average of 4.19 before the retreat to a 4.71 after the retreat. A substantial increase in the rating of this question could mean that youth enjoyed the presentation given to them by older 4-H members on state, national, and international 4-H opportunities.

Keeping junior high school-age youth involved in 4-H through their teenage years gives them more opportunities for positive youth development. Ongoing research (Lerner, 2006) is showing that participation in activities like 4-H as teenagers helps increase positive youth development and reduce negative behaviors. Efforts that target junior high school-age youth can help to increase the number of youth that stay in 4-H throughout their school careers, increasing their exposure to positive youth development and contributing to a healthy society in the future.

The planning committee (made up of adults and teens) agreed that the first event was a success and has committed to conducting two retreats each year. The committee hopes that offering consistent activities for junior high school-age 4-H members will increase the number of Canyon County 4-H members that participate in county, district, state, national, and international activities for teens. Keeping young people involved in 4-H throughout their teenage years will help them gain life skills that will impact them for years to come.


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