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Incorporating Special Needs Youth into 4-H

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Incorporating Special Needs Youth into 4-H

Abstract

The Winning 4-H Plan provides Extension professionals, volunteers, parents, and youth with hands-on activities to improve their understanding of special needs youth and to promote inclusion of these youth in traditional 4-H programs. The program emphasizes acceptance by peers through an educational 4-H plan. When using appropriate project materials that follow a step-by-step progression, the end result will be a positive judging experience. The Winning 4-H Plan creates a 4-H environment where youth with disabilities can reach their fullest potential as capable, competent, caring, and contributing citizens.

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Introduction

Extension professionals from Highland and Pike Counties in Ohio developed a program called the "Winning 4-H Plan" to better serve youth with special needs. The Winning 4-H Plan is grounded in the belief that all youth should be able to take advantage of opportunities provided through 4-H. This program provides resources for Extension professionals, volunteers, parents, and youth, and includes hands-on activities to help those groups be more aware of some of the experiences that special needs youth face daily. The goal of the Winning 4-H Plan is to create a 4-H environment where youth with disabilities can reach their fullest potential as capable and contributing citizens.

Approach

Youth with disabilities have the right to enjoy, benefit, and learn from extracurricular activities such as 4-H. Shapiro (2000) suggests that "Empathy develops only when typical children gain an understanding of the causes, origins, handicapping effects and consequences of disabilities and feel comfortable interacting with those who have them period." According to Stumpf, Henderson, Luken, Bialeschki, and Casey (2002), "Inclusion means that people with disabilities have the same opportunities for involvement in meaningful and satisfying experiences as afforded other segments of the population."

However, inclusion of special needs youth in traditional 4-H programs is not enough in itself. Some adaptations should be made to increase the understanding by 4-H members and adult volunteers to the sensitive issues facing special needs youth. We've come to believe through our observations as Extension professionals that 4-H programs and trainings are a necessity for volunteers who will be assisting special needs youth in the club setting. Special needs youth will benefit from activities and opportunities that let them use their talents and interests. This will help ensure that children with special needs have the broadest educational opportunity available through the hands-on learning experiences that 4-H provides.

Research indicates that Extension professionals and volunteers would be amenable to such training. A survey by Boone, Boone, Reed, Woloshuk, and Gartin (2006) found that "over 90% of all of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that including special needs youth as 4-H members would be a good experience for other members; that mainstreaming of special needs youth in 4-H offers mixed group interaction, which will foster understanding self-esteem for all; and that special needs persons can be productive members of society."

Sensitivity Trainings

The Winning 4-H Plan lessons provide sensitivity training that helps Extension professionals, 4-H volunteers, parents, and youth become more aware of disabilities and possible interventions for 4-H programming. A series of hands-on work stations, adapted from the PetPALS curriculum help participants briefly experience what it is like to have a disability. For example, visual impairment is simulated by having participants complete tasks while their eyes are covered with yellow cellophane wrap. The hands-on tasks include:

- Buttoning shirt buttons with latex-free gloves on
- Counting "pills" (colored M&M's) in amber colored pill bottles
- Reading the comics
- Looking up a phone number and placing the call
- Making change
- Playing cards
- Tasting jelly
- Word search

This form of training has been found to be more effective than discussions and lecture awareness programs at helping participants become more sensitive to what special needs youth require to succeed. The Winning 4-H Plan may prepare adults and youth to adapt project materials and opportunities in ways that are appropriate for special needs youth. Creating activities with a step-by-step progression of challenges allows youth to achieve successes that can be celebrated. During facilitation of the sensitivity training, 4-H youth and adult volunteers gain more insight into the challenges of being a special needs youth. Following sensitivity training, participants are guided through a processing activity that allows them to reflect on their experience.

Conclusion

The Winning 4-H Plan is designed to create a 4-H culture that embraces all youth. By providing resources, open communication, and training, the Winning 4-H plan can help Extension professionals, 4-H volunteers, and parents better serve the special need 4-H population.

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