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## Creating Inclusive 4-H Environments for People with Disabilities

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## Creating Inclusive 4-H Environments for People with Disabilities

### Abstract

The purpose of a 4-year 4-H Inclusion Project conducted in North Carolina was to create intentionally inclusive 4-H environments and engage communities to address the needs of people with disabilities. In year one an experiential curriculum, "Shine Up and Step Out," was developed for youth ages 9 to 12 years. In the next 3 years, selected counties used the curriculum and developed training and resource opportunities. A summative evaluation showed how the county projects were successful and offered recommendations about the curriculum, statewide inclusion opportunities, program and policy, community involvement, and ongoing implementation and evaluation.

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The Intentionally Inclusive 4-H Project was a 4-year endeavor to promote inclusive environments in North Carolina. Inclusion was defined as all participants, including people with disabilities, having an opportunity to learn a variety of skills in emotionally and physically safe environments with opportunities for choice. Disability referred to the inability to perform one or more major life activities of self-care, range of motion, manipulation, communication, learning, working, cognitive processing, or maintaining relationships. Disabilities may include a wide range of developmental, psychiatric, and physical problems that may be chronic or acute. The premise of inclusion means creating an environment where all people, regardless of ability, feel they are welcome and can access supports needed for meaningful involvement.

Rather than offering special programs only for people with disabilities, the trend today is toward providing supports to increase inclusive opportunities within all programs open to the public. For most individuals, the elimination of physical, communication, and social barriers reduces the need for special programs. Inclusion, however, involves more than just placing people with disabilities into a group or program. It involves social interaction as well as physical integration. Providing support expresses an acceptance of a person and their abilities and enables the individual to

participate at his or her level of independence. Inclusion means altering the environment rather than forcing the person with a disability to change (Stumpf, Henderson, Luken, Bialeschki, & Casey, 2002).

As an organization financed through federal, state, and local governments, 4-H is mandated to comply with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA specifies that no one shall be denied opportunities, segregated, or otherwise discriminated against based on their disabilities. More than the legal mandate, however, the philosophy of providing opportunities for all citizens is paramount to the programming and policies administered by the Extension Service.

The issue of youth with disabilities and 4-H involvement is not new, but few evaluation efforts have been directed toward intentional inclusion. People with disabilities are an area of limited study in Extension research. In 1994, McBreen explained what Extension staff should know about ADA compliance. In that same year, Tormoehlen and Field (1994) described a Purdue University project that examined the rationale and outcomes of 4-H programs aimed at getting more youth with disabilities involved. Ingram's (1999) survey of Pennsylvania Extension professionals verified that the majority of staff thought people with disabilities should be involved in Extension programs.

Because of this scarcity of resources and information about successful practices, a proposal was written and awarded to North Carolina Extension by the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities to undertake a 4-H inclusion project. The purpose of the project was to use a curriculum to develop intentional strategies for making 4-H programs in North Carolina more inclusive.

In the first year (1998-99) of the program, curriculum materials titled "Shine Up and Step Out" were developed for use in county 4-H programs. (A copy of the curriculum and the lesson designs is available from the first author.) In the second year (1999-2000), three counties proposed demonstration projects that were completed (see Stumpf et al., 2002). In the next two years, five additional counties received funding for demonstration projects to create inclusive 4-H programs.

Through an evaluation conducted twice a year (based on person-to-person and telephone in-depth interviews with county agents and program assistants, and an examination of the new curriculum materials), a qualitative evaluation was conducted to ascertain the value of the project and to provide guidance for all counties in the state, as well as throughout the country, to consider in creating inclusive 4-H environments. The full impact of this experimental program will be evident over the years as more individuals with disabilities become involved with 4-H youth programs.

## **Summary of Inclusion Activities**

### **Curriculum Materials**

All counties in North Carolina had access to the "Shine Up and Step Out" curriculum materials developed in the first year of the project. The 12-lesson curriculum was designed to raise awareness among 9- to 12-year-old youth about people with disabilities and disabling conditions (Stumpf et al., 2002). An emailed survey was sent to all counties in the state to ascertain how the inclusion curriculum had been used. The data indicated that counties that had received grants were the primary users of the material. In these counties the curriculum was given to 4-H clubs, used in after school programs, and used for training volunteers, Teens Reaching Youth (TRY), and public school teachers.

All staff who used the curriculum thought the materials were useful. Comments were made about how easy the guide was to use, how easily accessible the materials were, and how youth enjoyed participating in the activities. Staff said the curriculum served as a guideline and provided helpful information for people not familiar with specific disabilities, allowed for a sequential flow of learning, and was especially useful in training teens.

The "Shine Up and Step Out" curriculum benefited young people because the lessons offered hands-on activities to illustrate the information taught. The curriculum was also perceived as a source of information that could be useful in lifelong interactions with people with disabilities. Staff said they felt that adults and youth expressed empathy and concern for other people as a result of using the curriculum.

The county staff were divided about whether or not they felt the curriculum could be used by itself without other resources. Most of the respondents agreed that the material could be used alone, but felt additional resources leveraged from the community and from the Internet made the program richer. Using materials gained from the Internet, such as materials from specific disability groups, often provided additional information that could not be covered in depth in the 4-H curriculum. Responses were also mixed regarding whether or not additional expertise or training was needed to implement the curriculum. The majority of county agents felt that the more training that one received, the better able they would be to use the curriculum effectively.

Many factors, including the uniqueness of each county, seemed to enter into how the curriculum could be used most effectively. Most staff who used the curriculum thought it helped them gain a greater understanding of people with disabilities and helped to decrease some of the barriers and "unknowns" about this population. The guide was also helpful in designing strategies to address barriers to participation in youth programs experienced by people with disabilities.

## County Approaches

Staff in counties in North Carolina were invited to prepare proposals to focus on how 4-H might intentionally become more inclusive in their counties. Two of the counties involved were urban, four were semi-rural in that they were within an hour's drive of a metropolitan area, and two were rural. The eight counties involved in this project (five for a 2-year period, and three for 1-year) approached inclusion in a variety of ways. All the counties used some of the funding to hire a part-time program assistant to carry out the proposed program. These staff members were instrumental in helping the 4-H agents find supplemental materials, conduct trainings, and extend outreach efforts in the counties.

Staff in each of the funded counties developed their own supplemental resources to use in supporting the "Shine Up and Step Out" curriculum. Several staff put together materials compiled from the Internet or from other resources in the community. These materials were then either made available for 4-H staff and volunteers to use or were available in the local library for use by anyone.

All 4-H staff in each of the counties put together training opportunities. In some cases, the training was focused on 4-H club leaders and teens. In other cases, it was conducted with after school 4-H program leaders or with public school teachers (both special education teachers and classroom teachers). One county targeted parents with the training materials, and another focused on Americorps leaders and day care centers. Two counties also reported training staff to use the materials at summer camps and other seasonal events. The focus of the initial training was on how to use the "Shine Up and Step Out" curriculum. Counties that used the curriculum in the second year spent additional time marketing the materials for use more broadly in their communities.

A key aspect of focusing on inclusion in several counties was in developing partnerships with other service providers, including other disability organizations in the urban counties, or working with local school districts and local government officials. Staff in several counties recognized the importance of inclusion as an ongoing process that had to be addressed in developing Extension partnerships throughout their counties, not just with youth programs.

Several counties reported some gains in involving more youth with disabilities becoming involved in 4-H activities, although the numbers were small and the statistics were not easy to collect. Developing inclusive environments seemed to require education, training, teamwork, and time. Staff in the demonstration counties felt that the investment was worth the effort when they saw a raised awareness of and advocacy for inclusion.

## Conclusions About the Inclusive 4-H Project

Based on 4 years of data from the project, the following items summarized the primary accomplishments of counties that focused on intentionally inclusive 4-H programs.

1. Each county took a somewhat different approach to the 4-H inclusion project. Staff in each county addressed their unique situation in determining how best to disseminate information, use resources, and address inclusion issues.
2. Counties that had 2 years of funding seemed to progress further overall in making their 4-H environments inclusive. The first year was often a time of establishing a program and setting up resources and potential partnerships. The second year provided opportunities to implement the curriculum more broadly and refine the training, outreach, and service begun the previous year. Counties that continued to address the inclusion philosophy after the funding ended indicated that they saw more young people with disabilities become a part of the 4-H programs.
3. Rural counties seemed to benefit the most from this project because the counties tended to be resource limited. These staff assessed their situation and put together resources that were unavailable elsewhere in their county. They also established partnerships with other community entities as a way to broaden the use of the curriculum. Most county staff found the addition of other materials (obtained from partners in the community as well as from the Internet) was an effective way to supplement the curriculum.
4. Funding a program assistant devoted to the work of inclusion in the county provided a critical "jump start" for initiating inclusion in 4-H. Individuals in this role were invaluable in training volunteers and staff, and in making contacts and working with other community organizations.
5. The connections and partnerships made with community groups that either had resources or were interested in disability issues were useful. Each county assessed the needed relationships in different ways and made the contacts to develop partnerships that would be mutually beneficial to all parties.
6. Leader (volunteer adults and youth) training was a central outcome of distributing the curriculum and addressing the ongoing process of inclusion.

# Recommendations to Create Inclusive Environments

Based on the evaluation of this 4-H Inclusion Project over 4 years, we offer the following recommendations for developing inclusive environments and opportunities for people with disabilities. These recommendations relate to the curriculum materials, statewide inclusion opportunities, program and policy, community involvement, and ongoing implementation and evaluation.

## Additional Materials

- The "Shine Up and Step Out" curriculum was useful as a tool for first year awareness of disabilities and disability issues. In the subsequent years, additional materials should be developed to enhance the awareness materials. Additional guidelines or manuals with a progression of information can move staff beyond awareness to outreach to people with disabilities and to ongoing support for programs that are inclusive. Additional materials need to focus on recruitment and retention, age-appropriate activities, developing partnerships in communities, incorporating inclusion approaches into ongoing organizational policy, and training for advocacy. To increase the number of people with disabilities in 4-H, Extension personnel need to be assisted with recruitment plans that are combined with awareness materials.
- Successful models that have worked in the funded counties in North Carolina as well as other places throughout the country must be shared and incorporated into statewide and national training. Leaders in state 4-H offices should develop an ongoing plan to help all staff develop inclusive environments and services. Inclusion should become an integral part of all future staff and volunteer training. Staff in state 4-H offices might also consider developing some type of mechanism (e.g., awards, incentives) to recognize staff in counties that have been successful in developing and sustaining inclusive 4-H programs.
- The work done in this inclusion project was useful as a first step in providing awareness of rights, needs, and abilities of people with disabilities and moving forward to develop inclusive programs. The next phase is sustainability and a focus on policy issues. Counties and other organizations within counties must adopt the philosophy of inclusion and incorporate it into all that is undertaken. Inclusion is not just a program, but a philosophy. Only with a policy focus will inclusion outcomes occur and be sustained.
- All staff, not just 4-H agents, must be involved in inclusion in the state's Extension services. All staff in Extension must be trained and become educated about the Americans with Disabilities Act and intentional inclusion. Although it was helpful to have an individual (i.e., program assistant) dedicated to doing the initial work, all county staff and policy makers must have a "buy in" to the mandates and benefits and importance of inclusion.
- A dimension that should be addressed through training and curriculum materials is advocacy. This focus enables Extension staff and community leaders to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities and to incorporate advocacy skills within youth training.
- Working in partnerships with other community groups is essential in creating inclusive environments and having an impact locally. The development of partnerships within communities and counties must be a central component for future outreach, policy, and program implementation.
- Much misunderstanding surrounds the Americans with Disabilities Act. Extension can have a vital role in educating communities about ADA, not only by example with its 4-H and other programs, but by providing training and consulting with a variety of community groups, including school districts.
- Documenting the number of individuals with disabilities was difficult due to definitions of what constituted disability, invisible disabilities, disclosure issues, and an inability to track disabilities. The definition of "youth with disabilities" needs to be clarified as the definition varied among agencies. If measuring change in the numbers of adult and volunteers in Extension programs is to occur, the definition needs to be made clear.
- A focus on disability awareness is critical as a first step. If people with disabilities are to be a part of community programs, such as 4-H, an ongoing focus must be on how to ensure individuals with disabilities are offered inclusive opportunities. The progression of information must move beyond awareness to "marketing, recruitment, and retention."
- Further materials might be developed and aimed at the public to explain the notion of inclusion and what it means to 4-H and Extension programs. PSAs as well as other media examples might be useful to have particularly for counties that have prepared leaders and staff to accommodate youth with disabilities into the 4-H program as well as other Extension educational programs within counties.

In summary, the 4-H Inclusion Project was an innovative approach to address the needs of people with and without disabilities in North Carolina. Both youth and adults were targeted. The impact of this program is yet to be fully felt, but the philosophy of inclusion is becoming a permanent tenant

of 4-H and Extension programs. This project was an important first step toward the goal of providing every person with an inclusive welcoming environment in which to grow and live.

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