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Building Your Youth Development Toolkit: A Community Youth Development Orientation for Pennsylvania 4-H/Youth Programs

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE

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Abstract

Pennsylvania Extension youth and family educators participated in an experiential inservice program that provided research findings, resources, activities, and teaching strategies to enhance positive community youth development programming in their counties. Participant evaluations showed significant gain in knowledge and understanding of community youth development concepts and the desire to apply these concepts in youth programs. Data from the evaluation provide strong evidence of the importance of developing a common framework and language for youth and family educators related to youth development. An inservice model that includes "booster" information to reinforce concepts after the inservice has application to other program areas.

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Introduction

As the 21st century begins, concern about the well-being of youth warrants worldwide priority attention. Massive changes in the structures of families, communities, and places and types of work, and economic disruptions and international affairs are creating a new and different landscape for the development of youth.

For some youth it is the best of times, and for others it is the worst of times. For many it is both. For far too many youth, the infrastructure needed to foster healthy development has been dangerously eroded (Benson, 1997). These urgent concerns have increased attention on all youth-serving organizations, and especially on 4-H, the national youth-serving organization within the land grant university system.

Pittman and Irby (1996), for example, assert that "We [society] have reduced the challenges of youth development to a series of problems to be solved, leaving the core inputs for development--supports and opportunities--to be addressed in a catch-as-catch can fashion." Preparing young people to meet challenges requires providing them with a foundation that will enable them to make decisions that promote their own positive development (Perkins & Borden, In press). Thus, Extension's 4-H Youth Development program, like other youth-serving organizations, is being challenged to focus on programming that will enable youth to develop life skills, establish positive relationships with adults and peers, and contribute to their communities.

We already know much from the research base of youth development that can give us assistance in enhancing positive outcomes for youth, as well as strengthening and/or rebuilding the infrastructure for youth development. To meet the challenges that programs such as the 4-H Youth Development program face, we must ask what can be learned and applied to 4-H Youth Development programs from this extensive knowledge base to increase youth's assets and life skills and reduce their risks. We must also ask what the congruence is between research and

practice that fosters positive youth development, as well as how community-based programs can be contexts that promote positive youth development.

These important questions form the basis for a statewide inservice effort designed to increase the knowledge base of our youth and family educators, and equip them with resources to foster community youth development. This paper describes the process of the in service session and evaluates the resulting impact it had.

The inservice provided educators with the tools and skills necessary to assist themselves and staff from other youth-serving agencies and organizations in shifting their programs from a deficit focus to a positive youth development focus. In turn, the information and tools from this inservice provide Extension youth and family educators with the skills necessary to become youth development experts in their local communities.

One of the steps toward a clearer vision in an organization is the establishment of a common language that allows professionals in that organization to articulate the concepts under which many of them have been operating for years (Murphy, 1995). Professional language legitimates a field by providing objective concepts that can be discussed across professions and by elevating the status of professionals. It thus helps the field to gain the attention and support of policy makers, funders, and other stakeholders. More important, a common language enables youth professionals to collaborate in their efforts to positively influence youth by employing a coordinated community youth development perspective.

Program Objectives

4-H Youth Development programs are designed to help young people develop the kinds of skills needed to make positive, healthy decisions, both now and in the future. All 4-H curricula and projects, regardless of differences in content area, provide youth with experiences that foster the development of skills and encourage them to become contributing, caring members of their communities. Therefore, 4-H educators, who implement programs, and content specialists, who develop curricula, need to be grounded in community youth development concepts.

Community youth development is defined as:

Creating opportunities for young people to connect to others, develop skills, and utilize those skills to contribute to their communities that, in turn, increase their ability to succeed. As with positive youth development, a community youth development orientation involves shifting away from just concentrating on problems toward concentrating on strengths, competencies, and engagement in self-development and community development. As such, community youth development is defined as purposely creating environments that provide constructive, affirmative, and encouraging relationships that are sustained over time with adults and peers, while concurrently providing an array of opportunities that enable youth to build their competencies, and become engaged as partners in their own development as well as the development of their communities (Perkins, Borden, & Villarruel, In press).

The community youth development framework was applied during a 2-day intensive experiential educational program for Penn State Extension's youth and family county educators. The educational inservice addressed the following list of learning objectives: Youth and family educators will:

- Identify key research findings related to community youth development;
- Recognize and understand Search Institute's (see Benson, 1997; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998) assets and deficits;
- Identify and comprehend Hendrick's (1996) life skill model related to community youth development;
- Identify and understand Barkman and Machtmes' (2000) Four-fold youth development model;
- Implement programs utilizing a community youth development framework;
- Employ cutting-edge resources related to community youth development in their work with volunteers and youth;
- Communicate the community youth development framework to stakeholders, volunteers, county commissioners, and members of other youth-serving organizations;
- Develop curricula and programs that intentionally address assets and life skills;
- Understand and apply the experiential learning model to youth and family programs and projects;
- Involve youth as partners in planning, implementing, and evaluating youth programs at the local level; and
- Encourage youth to be engaged as contributing members of their communities.

During the inservice, each participant received a youth development toolkit (a large plastic bin) containing books, reference articles, and resource materials, as well as teaching packets related to community youth development, developmental assets, experiential education, life skill development, quality youth development programs, and youth empowerment and participation. Some of the resources were featured during inservice sessions, and all resources were given to the educators for use in their county programming.

Program Outcomes

Sixty-two county-based Extension educators and two Extension faculty members attended the inservice. The county-based educators who attended are responsible for 4-H Youth Development programming in their counties. Several educators had dual 4-H Youth Development and Family and Consumer Sciences responsibilities. Forty-nine (73%) of Pennsylvania's 67 counties were represented at the inservice program. Several counties were represented by multiple educators.

A post-then pre- evaluation survey was used. The post-then pre- has been found to be robust as an evaluation instrument for inservice education (Rockwell, 1989). This approach was employed because participants had too limited a knowledge of community youth development concepts at the beginning of the inservice to accurately rate their baseline understanding and knowledge. Indeed, participants' self-assessment of knowledge is sometimes inflated because, so to speak, they do not know what they do not know. A post-then-pre evaluation guards against that inflation and provides greater accuracy of data than a pre-post evaluation.

Participants were asked to rate using a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from a 1, indicating a low level of understanding or ability, to a 5, indicating a high level of understanding or ability. The questions addressed participants' knowledge about the specific content after the inservice was over as compared to their knowledge about it before the inservice.

In addition, the survey examined the participants' perceived ability to conduct various tasks related to the inservice. Table 1 summarizes the mean differences between perceptions of understanding following and then before the inservice. A t-test was conducted to determine significance of differences on the content items. All increases in perceived knowledge and understanding following the inservice training were significant ($p < .001$) (see Table 1). In addition, all increases in perceived skills and abilities were significant ($p < .001$) as shown in Table 2.

Table 1

Comparison of Knowledge and Understanding of Community Youth Development Information Before and After the Inservice

Understanding	Mean Scores		T-value
	Before	After	
The asset framework	2.2	4.1	11.23*
4-Fold Youth Dev. Model	2.3	3.7	8.20*
Keys to quality youth programs	2.5	4.0	9.69*
Keys to volunteer management	2.5	3.5	7.36*
Engaging youth as partners	3.0	3.9	6.83*
Engaging youth in service	3.0	4.0	5.69*
*Note: Indicates mean scores were significantly different at $p < .001$			

Table 2

Comparison of Perceived Ability to Apply Community Youth Development Information and Resources Before and After the Inservice

Abilities	Mean Scores		T-value
	Before	After	
Present and explain the asset framework to volunteers and other youth professionals	1.0	3.6	11.23*
Present and explain the four fold model to volunteers and other youth professionals	1.9	3.3	8.60*
Assesses program in terms of the four-fold model, the asset framework, and life skills model	1.8	3.5	10.76*
Use the resources to develop activities and programs that increase skills and competencies of youth	2.4	4.3	11.44*
Use resources for volunteer training and skill building	2.3	3.9	9.51*
Assess program in terms of the keys to quality youth programs	2.5	4.0	8.89*
Assess volunteer mgt. program	2.6	3.6	6.80*
Utilize the resources to engage youth as partners	2.4	3.9	9.57*

*Indicates mean scores were significantly different at $p < .001$

Increases in knowledge, understanding, and subsequent ability to communicate to others an asset approach to youth development, life skills, quality youth programs, and youth empowerment provide evidence of meeting program objectives related to identification and understanding of community youth development. These significant increases also indicate increased ability to apply the community youth development framework.

Participants were also asked to rank to what extent they gained practical information, insight, and strategies to support community youth development. A five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from a 1, indicating very little gain, to a 5, indicating a great deal of gain, was used for this assessment. The mean score of participants' ranking was 4.2, which provides additional evidence to support the applied nature of the inservice.

To assist with implementation and integration of the community youth development framework into county programs, each participant was asked to write an action plan. The action plan addressed questions regarding intentions to use, integrate, and share with others the information learned from the inservice, and asked participants to anticipate changes to programming. Comments and plans identified were varied, but some common themes emerged.

For example, more than half of the educators reported that they plan to include information on asset building in program planning, in community presentations, at volunteer trainings, in newsletter and news articles, at officer training, at camp, with external agencies and boards, and in local promotional displays about 4-H. All of the participants indicated at least one concept, idea, activity, or resource that they plan to present to a group of volunteers, colleagues, and/or other youth professionals. More than 50% reported that they plan to employ the models presented in grant proposal development.

In addition, approximately 25% of the participants indicated that they would integrate information on ages and stages of youth development into their programming. For example, participants reported that they would use information about ages and stages to train local colleagues, teen and adult volunteer leaders, camp counselors, and community youth coalition members. Finally, educators reported a need to increase the involvement of youth on boards and committees, and to strengthen youth/adult partnerships.

Discussion

The data from the evaluation of this inservice provides strong evidence of the importance of developing a common framework and language for youth and family educators in terms of youth programming and community development. The inservice represented an initial step toward integrating the community youth development framework and the different models of youth development (i.e., assets model, life skills model, and the 4-Fold Youth Development model) into youth and family programming. In addition, the "community" part of community youth development was addressed by increasing educators' understanding of youth empowerment, youth participation, youth at the decision-making table, and youth engaged in service for their community.

The momentum gained from this initial effort needs further support in order for these ideas to be integrated into 4-H Youth Development programs. Since the information and relevant resources were distributed to the participants in a relatively short period, Perkins and Mincemoyer are delivering monthly "booster shots" via distance technology to reinforce learning from the inservice and to encourage application of concepts.

Booster shots are brief reviews of information and activities found in resources distributed at the inservice. The booster resource reviews are sent to all inservice participants via e-mail each month. The reviews direct the reader to the resource for more information and discuss programmatic application of the concepts presented.

In addition, to ensure that all staff working with youth and families understand these youth development concepts that form the foundation for all programming, new extension staff orientation will include information about community youth development. Moreover, annual inservices are being planned to build upon this initial endeavor.

The positive response to the inservice format provides the basis for building a successful training model. Participants received information about community youth development, participated in hands-on activities that supported the community youth development framework, received teaching tools, and then returned to their communities with resources and ideas to directly apply to their educational programs. Several participants commented about the interactive and applied nature of the inservice. Some of their remarks follow.

- "It is great to do some of the activities and to see how to use them (the resources)";
- "Excellent example of learning by doing"; and
- "The emphasis on tools, practical resources, etc. was good."

Although this training model is time and resource intensive, the investment is returned each time

the resources are used in educational programs or with other youth-serving professionals. Moreover, this model has the potential to transfer to other topics and program areas.

Inservice Model

It should be noted that changes in understanding and abilities are based on participants' own perceptions of their learning and growth in skill. A follow-up evaluation is planned to determine how much information they incorporated into their programs, presentations, and volunteer training sessions. As the nation's premier youth-serving organization, 4-H Youth Development and the professionals who staff it have an obligation to lead by example in the advancement of a community youth development approach.

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