

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE 4-H EXPERIENCE

Independence

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Introduction

The goal of positive youth development is to help young people grow into capable, competent, well adjusted, independent, contributing members of a global society. The ability of youth to ascertain some type of independence appears to be the theme of many researchers in this area. Gambone and Connell (2004) discuss a framework for youth development that begins with economic self-sufficiency. Lerner et al (2005) describes five constructs of positive youth development as: 1) competence, 2) confidence, 3) connection, 4) character, 5) caring and compassion, which help the youth acquire skills needed for becoming an independent adult. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) believe that resilience and competency building are important to the path to adulthood.

Why is independence important?

Independence occurs when youth begin to understand that they are able to influence their future through decisions and actions (Kress, 2006). Individuals who work with youth need to build environments in which youth can start learning and practicing decision making. Young people need to create problem solving habits that become a basis for making informed choices, believe in a future with real opportunities, become life-long learners, and learn to become active citizens (Kress, 2006). It is through positive environments that youth gain the practice and confidence they will need to successfully use those skills in the future.

Of the four essential elements, independence is the element that takes a look at the long range outcomes of the young people served in the youth development organization. Gambone, Klem, and Connell, (2002) provide a framework for adult outcomes which include: 1) economic self-sufficiency, 2) healthy family and social relationships, and 3) community involvement. These type of outcomes are the goals of intentional youth development organizations.

What does research show?

Researchers within the field of youth development vary with their methodologies and vocabulary when identifying and defining independence. Kress (2004) is the originator of the 4-H Youth Development Program's use of the four essential elements and she describes independence in that "youth need to know that they are able to influence people and events through decision-making and action".

Yet, some of the most widely accepted is the framework for long-term outcomes in adulthood by Gambone, Klem, and Connell, (2002) which includes: 1) economic self-sufficiency, 2) healthy family and social relationships, 3) community involvement. These three outcomes discuss the importance of young people being able to earn a "livable" wage where one job is able to support themselves without the need for two or three jobs to be able to make ends meet. It also shares the need for young people to be in positive relationships that are strong, stable and positive in nature. Finally, the authors stress the need that young people learn to navigate their communities and are able to "give back" to the people and places in which they live. It is the integration of these three outcomes in this framework that are the hallmark of independence for these authors.

Others believe independence might include educational attainment, leadership skills, work ethic, and civic engagement (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Mitra (2004) believes in three other building blocks towards independence, exerting influence – agency, developing meaningful relationships with others – belonging, and being appreciated for one's talents – competence. During late adolescence, youth become more capable of managing their own learning and problem solving as well as forming their identity and moral reasoning according to Zarrett & Eccles (2006). Dworkin & Bremer (2004) list six developmental processes that influence the idea of independence: 1) identity work -- trying new things, learning about self and limits, 2) development of initiative – setting goals,

managing time, responsibility, perseverance, 3) learning emotional competencies – controlling anger/anxiety and stress, using emotions constructively, 4) development of peer relationships and knowledge – interacting with peers outside of their clique, sympathy towards others, intimacy with and loyalty to friends, 5) development of social skills – working together, learning about leadership and responsibility, giving and taking feedback, learning about communications skills, 6) acquiring social capital – learning about community, gaining support from leaders and community members. While all authors have differences, there are commonalities in that they agree in skills being acquired, some kind of relationship with self or others, and a type of mental awareness or reasoning.

Obviously, the definition of independence varies among researchers within the field of youth development. However, there are common themes that prevail. Young people need opportunities to develop and practice gaining leadership, building relationships, and gaining responsibility. Tilton-Weaver, Vitunski and Galambos (2001) sum up the sentiments of multiple researchers quite well with their ideas about maturity in adolescence consisting of three domains, autonomy (functioning independently), interpersonal adequacy (communicating and interacting with others effectively), and social responsibility (contributing to the well-being of society). Their ideas are very similar to the Gambone, Klem, and Connell (2002) ideas of economic self-sufficiency, healthy family and social relationships, and community involvement outcomes which are the goals for high quality, intentional youth development programs.

Summary

Young people need environments that will help them learn what they need to be economically self-sufficient, have healthy family and social relationships, and become involved within their communities, (Gambone, Klem, and Connell, 2002). Youth development professionals create opportunities for young people to practice decision making that allow them to believe they have a real influence in their future (Kress, 2006). It is through these opportunities that youth hone their life skills so they can be successful as they transition to adulthood.

Knowing that independence is described in myriad ways throughout research allows youth development organizations a broad scope for their programs. It is the job of each organization to find a working definition for their team so they can create intentional programs that help youth learn and practice decision making skills which will influence their future. It is through this intentionality that programs can set goals for the positive adult outcome of independence for all youth participants.

Suggested Curricula

Health Rocks (<http://4-hmall.org/Curriculum.aspx>)

Jr. Master Gardener (<http://4-hmall.org/Curriculum.aspx>)

4-H CCS (<http://4-hcurriculum.org/projectsonline.spx>)

Project Adventure, Citizenship Public Adventures (<http://4-hmall.org/Curriculum.aspx>)

Reference Books:

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