

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE 4-H EXPERIENCE

Generosity

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Introduction

Generosity allows youth to give of their energy and talents to benefit others in the world around them. It extends from the range of community service projects to civic engagement and embodies the spirit of providing self-less service to organizations or individuals which need help. Young people can be involved in simple tasks such as picking up trash in their local park or along a highway. As young people mature they develop a need for more significant engagement in their community, which could include lobbying for social issues. Youth involvement today ranges from engaging in public policy to asserting civil rights to even drawing attention to issues of injustice or unequal access (Sherrod, Flanagan, Kassimir & Syvertsen, 2005). All of those activities can be an example of generosity, but can differ depending upon the age of youth and their interests. Fully engaging youth in organizations, such as 4-H, has been shown via research (Lerner et al, 2005) to achieve tremendous youth development outcomes (Kim & Sherman, 2006). Young people have been able to develop a sense of membership and collective voice in an organization that is larger than themselves (Flanagan & Van Horn, 2001).

Why is generosity important?

Social responsibility is the sense of obligation that an individual or groups feels to fellow human beings or to society (Hamilton and Flanagan, 2007). Generosity is an invaluable life skill and participating in generous service to others is an opportunity for youth to develop into positive members of our community. According to Kress (2004), one key part of the essence of 4-H Youth Development is teaching knowledge and life skills which enhance the quality of life. Youth involved in the 4-H experience are encouraged to learn the benefits of generosity through club work. Their abundant energy is aptly combined with the needs of communities to mutually benefit both the individual as well as the locality.

Youth engagement is widely accepted as an integral part of successful youth development activities (Schulman, 2006).

This helps give their lives true meaning knowing that they are an independent and integral part of their community. Young people are powerful contributors to solving some of our country's most intractable problems (Kim & Sherman, 2006). This contribution to the community helps youth feel they have a collective purpose and a place to belong in their community (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002).

What does research show?

Generosity is the opportunity to value and practice service to others (Kress, 2004). It is the process of losing oneself in service to the greater good. In that service, young people can gain a broader view of the needs of the world around them. Generous individuals are described as good problem solvers, have meaningful social relationships, and show better work performance (Frisch, 2000).

It is important for youth to move beyond their individual self-interest and to be committed to the well-being of a larger group (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). For example, young people in 4-H actively participate in community service projects which build competence, confidence, connection, character, caring and compassion which promote skills needed to become a successful adult (Lerner, et al, 2005). When youth give generously of themselves in a well structured extracurricular activity, they report higher life satisfaction (Park, 2004).

In the past decade there has been a shift in the field of youth development from youth being clients of service to youth being resources. This shift resulted from a paper written by Pittman, et. al (2003) which embraced young people as stakeholders in their communities. A growing body of research has identified that participation in youth organizations helps young people develop a firm identity, increases public speaking skills, helps develop conflict resolution competencies, and helps them create community change (Kim & Sherman, 2006).

During that same period of time, youth-led and youth-run civic engagement programs have increased around the

country. Youth are being asked to partner with adult driven organizations to make a difference in their communities (Kim & Sherman, 2006). These project-based programs help youth with critical skills to navigate their communities, develop collective voice, build self esteem, and technical proficiencies (Ferman, 2005).

Intentional youth development programs can foster leadership, help others, and overcome adversity by participating in activities that give back to one's community (Murphy, et. al., 2004). These activities can provide important opportunities for practicing life skills necessary for positive adult outcomes. Benson (2004) describes these activities as pursuits that are as "psychologically and socially compelling" as any other part of human development.

There are three reasons for youth to be involved in activities which promote the essential element of generosity: for the satisfaction of doing good work that comes from helping others and the motivation that results, for the sense of "collective efficacy" that happens from involvement, and finally, to contribute to a set of "shared values" in the community which leads to a sense of belonging (Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss, 2002).

Summary

Whether the goal is to help others through a simple community service project or to engage youth civically in political and societal issues, either approach can have lasting benefits for youth. It is element of giving of one's time, the service to others that is the essence of generosity. That service can build competencies and confidence that can last a lifetime ranging from public speaking and conflict resolution, to technology skills and community change.

Young people can gain skills and connections from volunteer service that help them feel valued and important. Through their work, they can influence policies, speak out about issues, and begin to make decisions about what they feel is important. The growing field of youth activism is full of examples of youth acting on an ethic of social responsibility (Hamilton & Flanagan, 2007). If young people are considered community assets whose voices, contributions, and criticisms are taken seriously, then social change is inevitable (Hamilton & Flanagan, 2007).

Resources

Character Education ideas at: www.charactercounts.org
4-H Curriculum at: <http://4-hcurriculum.org/projectsonline.spx>
366 Community Service ideas at: <http://lancaster.unl.edu/4h/serviceideas.shtml>
4-H community service ideas at: <http://web1.msue.msu.edu/4h/commserv.html>
Sample 4-H Service-Learning Planning Guide at: <http://www.fourh.umn.edu/downloads/4hMG/Toolkit/Toolkit30ServicesLearningPlanningGuide.pdf>

Global Youth Service Day at: <http://www.ysa.org/NatlGYSD/tabid/59/Default.aspx>

Youth Voice and Engagement Toolkit: <http://www.extension.umn.edu/youth/00015.pdf>

Learning and Leading: A Toolkit for Youth Development and Civic Activism: http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/files/LearningAndLeading_ToolKit.pdf

The Innovation Center: <http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/catalog/toolkits/resources>

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