Letters to New Leaders: Letter 4
Leadership and Training Techniques

Missouri 4-H Youth Development Programs

Dear Volunteer Leader:

A wise teacher once noted that if children aren't interested, you can't teach them, but if they are interested, you can't keep them from learning. You might not see yourself as a teacher, but every 4-H leader is one!

Through you and other volunteers, 4-H members learn skills in their projects. Through other individual and group experiences, they develop lifelong characteristics such as positive self-esteem, sound decision-making, effective communication, responsibility and cooperation. 4-H leaders can be especially successful teachers because they establish a personal relationship.

Experiential Learning

As a leader, you build on young people's natural curiosity. Since youth learn through experiences, your role is to provide fun opportunities for hands-on learning.

The 4-H program encourages a learn-by-doing approach to teaching, but sometimes it isn't practical to learn from the actual experience. In those cases, use simulations, games, demonstrations or models. Avoid telling members to read as your primary teaching model.

The best resource leaders can use to effectively guide youth in learning about any of their 4-H projects are the 4-H curricula, also known as Leader's Guides. These are free or available from your local 4-H staff.

More Resources:

- *Welcoming, Encouraging Quality Matter Toolkit* and *Voice and Engagement: Quality Matter Toolkit* *4h.missouri.edu/volunteer*

- *LG 782, Ages and Stages of 4-H Youth Development*

  http://4h.missouri.edu/doc/ LG782-ages-and-stages-guide.pdf

Considering Age Levels

Each age group has its own characteristics and different developmental needs. Levels of development will affect learning. It is important to keep these differences in mind when you are working with various age groups in your 4-H club. Although not all children develop at the same rates, being aware of the general characteristics of youth at various stages will help you be a more effective volunteer leader.

Specific Encouragement versus Blanket Praise

All people thrive in a supportive environment, so creating a 4-H program where leaders demonstrate warmth is bound to attract and keep kids and their families in your club.

In addition to a warm emotional climate, positivity and praise can go along way when it is delivered fairly and in an authentic manner.

If possible, avoid ongoing "blanket praise" with youth. Instead, provide youth with specific words of encouragement that show that you noticed their positive actions. Refer to the *Quality Matters in 4-H Welcoming, Encouraging Toolkit*.

Leadership Styles

Your leadership style influences your club's meeting atmosphere. Great 4-H leaders use different leadership styles as needed.

- Autocratic—Leader makes decisions without members' input. Use this *minimally*.

- Laissez-faire—Members have complete freedom and responsibility. Plan social events instead of letting chaos rein during club meetings.

- Democratic—Youth members are supported ahead of time to plan, lead and reflect on the club meeting from start to finish. Youth develop strong leadership and life skills when they do this.

Building Youth Voice

Youth voice can happen at many levels within 4-H programs, at the club and outside the monthly club business meetings.

Young people :

- can lead and mentor other young people,

- share control and decision-making with staff, and

- have many chances to make choices about what they do and how they do it.

Four keys to youth engagement and giving voice:

1. Support

2. Opportunities

3. Space

4. Resources

Principles of youth voice

Respect: If you give it, you'll receive it!

Ask challenging questions, listen and avoid age stereotypes.

Communication: Listen up! Young people are best heard when adults step back; adults are best heard when they are straightforward and explain where they are coming from. I

Meaningful involvement: Count us in! Involving young people

Reframing Conflict

There are many reasons youth misbehave. Sometimes, they want attention or are uncomfortable in the situation. They could be afraid of failure or just not interested in the activity. Leaders need to help the youth identify the possible reasons for the conflict and what they can do to fix their own problem. See the *Reframing Conflict Quality Matters Toolkit* for helpful tips and strategies.

Evaluation

Reflect on the good and bad points of your activity or meeting to improve future activities. Was it well planned? Did everyone participate and learn?

Adapted from *Letters to New 4-H Leaders,* M.A. Dodd, L. Hoglum, and M. Robinson (1998) Oregon State University Cooperative Extension, Corvallis, OR. Updated August 2017 by Elaine Anderson, Elaine George, Tammy Gillespie and Paula Skillicorn.

Quality Matters in 4-H: A Checklist for Staff and Volunteers

- __ I know how to provide a safe physical and emotional youth program environment
- __ I know how to provide a warm welcome to all youth, free of bias or exclusionary behavior
- __ I know the physical safety safeguards I should put in place at all 4-H events
- __ I know best practice strategies for helping youth reframe conflict if needed
- __ I know how to support youth engagement with materials and abstract ideas
- __ I allow youth officers or leaders control at least 50 percent of the club meetings
- __ I know how to support youth interaction through multiple planning techniques
- __ I know how to provide all youth with specific encouragement rather than blanket praise
- __ I know how to support youth decision making in content and process choices
- __ I know how to create opportunities for all youth to serve in a leadership role in some capacity
- __ I know how to create opportunities for all youth to express ideas with others
- __ I know how to provide all youth with opportunities to reflect and evaluate activity and club experiences

Thank you for your commitment to improving 4-H program quality through volunteer development!