

Broadening the Perspective on Health and Youth Development

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The 4-H youth development movement began almost 100 years ago. The purpose of the original boys and girls clubs was to reach families with information on improving agricultural production and food preservation. Throughout the 20th century, 4-H has successfully evolved into an organization whose main purpose is the development of young people. We all are familiar with the 4 Hs in 4-H, and know that one of them stands for health. But in contemporary society, what is the role of health in positive youth development like 4-H?

Corn and Canning Clubs

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the number of youth leaving family farms for the allure of the big cities caused concern across the country, particularly in rural America. At the same time, much was being learned about how to more effectively and efficiently grow and produce agricultural products. Although this information could increase production and profits, it became clear that farmers were not as interested as scientists had hoped. Scientists struggled to get this information to the people who needed it most. Thus the com-

munity club concept was a solution to both problems. Canning clubs (for girls) and corn clubs (for boys) were introduced as a way to engage youth in the family farm while getting information to families. (Reck, 1951) These clubs typically took place after school or on the weekend and in places where families gathered. As the club concept grew, demonstration projects were introduced as a way for youth to showcase the fruits of their labor. These two ways of working with youth spread quickly across the country to become what we now know as 4-H.

The Fourth Leaf

The phrase “head, heart and hand,” possibly taken from a poem by Rudyard Kipling, became a popular way for people around the country to express their commitment to the development of young people. The clover concept came from two Iowans in 1907. Jessie Field of Page County and O. H. Benson of Wright County worked in scientific agriculture and began rewarding students with pins and pennants shaped like three-leafed clovers, representing head, heart, and hands (Wessel & Wessel, 1982).

These three-leafed clover pins and pennants (and what they represented) became the national symbol for the boys and girls clubs popping up around the country. So when was the fourth leaf added to the clover? How did health fit into the bigger picture?



The fourth H, representing health, was introduced in 1911 to signify resistance to disease, enjoyment of life, and efficiency (Reck, 1951). In the early 1900s, these issues should have been of central importance to families in the United States. Improving the physical and emotional health of children increased the quality of life for families across the country. But a national contest held in 1923 to find the healthiest boy and girl in America grew out of a need to draw attention to adolescent health and to encourage health programs in rural America (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). This need to encourage rural communities to address health among their youth speaks to the idea that the importance of health had not yet found its place in communities. Nationally, there was a recognition that health impacted many facets of a young person's life, but this did not translate into the community clubs or into the 4-H movement as a whole. Health has often been seen as an issue that is separate from youth development. We argue that health is an important theme underlying all youth development experiences.

The Dimensions of Health

Webster's dictionary defines health as: "the condition of being sound in body, mind or spirit." This indicates that health is broader than the physical body. Health involves many elements of the human experience. If we define health with only one dimension (such as physical health or fitness), we risk ignoring some of the most crucial aspects of youth's experiences. In fact, it could be argued that (as with each of the Hs in 4-H) health is an overarching theme and youth development must attend to health of the head (intellectual growth and learning), health of the hands (physical health and fitness), and health of the heart (emotional and social well-being). In today's society, youth are faced with important health decisions every day; it is

important for youth development efforts to help youth make healthy decisions.

Sensitive Issues

The challenge for 4-H and all youth development work is that many of the most important youth health issues are morally or politically sensitive. There is often significant tension in a community regarding youth tobacco use, alcohol use or abuse, or sexual behavior. We tend to shy away from dealing with health issues because they seem to have a moral or ethical twist to them. Further, we might avoid these issues because we would like to think that they do not apply to 4-H or the children we know and work with.

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If we believe that optimal health is our goal for all youth, then we must recognize that our job is to address even the most uncomfortable aspects of a young person's health and development. If we do not address all of the issues that shape our young people's healthy development, how can we prepare them to successfully navigate these issues as adolescents or young adults? Though the importance and relevance of health issues varies by age and time in history, they remain fairly consistent across the lifespan: Emotional health, physical health, and spiritual health. If we value health within our organization, our direction and decisions will reflect this and will be made in synchrony with this philosophy.



Because health is central to positive development, youth development has a responsibility to provide leadership and education for youth in this domain. Likewise, because youth development programs are central in the lives of so many of our youth, it can be an important place for those youth to learn about health. For teens with limited access to parents or other adults, youth development programs are a central system of support and education in their lives. For these youth in particular, health *must* be included as part of their experience of positive youth development.

Taking the Lead

Health is an integral part of youth development. It is a defining issue of the childhood and adolescent years, and thus should be included in

the domain of youth development efforts through 4-H. In 1973, Gisela Konopka identified critical elements essential to the healthy development of young people. One of these elements is that youth need the opportunity to discuss conflicting values and to form their own. As adults, we must address our own (and others') discomfort with sensitive issues as we work to delineate where we stand on issues, then work to support youth in doing the same. Ideally, this process will bring communities together to aid adolescents in their growth and development. A nationally recognized youth development organization like 4-H should be in the forefront of working on issues that impact the lives of youth. With its attention to Head, Hands, Health, and Heart, 4-H can be a leader in this field.

Bibliography

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Millennium Youth Challenge Writing Contest

Brain Candy

by Troy Deutsch

tick...tick...tick...
 factory pounding out COOKIE CUTTER kids
 arm up
 stamp
 arm down
 rotate
 television frequencies char brain cells
 no brain cells
 property of the man

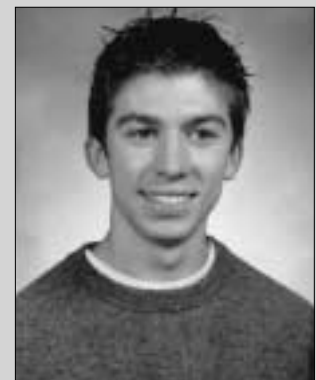
tick...tick...tick
 Y2K compliant
 bewitching hour palpable
 bewitching hour propaganda

tick...tick...tick...
 CARDBOARD CHILDREN SWALLOW
 CARDBOARD CONFETTI
 no life support
 artificial respiration is artificial
 internal bleeding unnoticed
 what's my diagnosis?
 sweep it under the rug

tick...tick...tick...
 trashcan full
 empty trashcan
 tiny shoe abandoned in gutter swallowed by projected
 image of Dick Clark
 Dick Clark

tick...tick...tick
 what time is it Mr. Fox? TICK

time is irrelevant. TICK
 CARDBOARD nothing.



Troy Deutsch
 Age 17