



Involving Parents as 4-H Volunteers

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Parents are integral to the success of youth development programs. Although volunteering with youth programs is a high priority with the American public, a common challenge is lack of adults to mentor and work with youth who would like the opportunity to be involved. The top three reasons people volunteer with a youth program are making a difference in the lives of youth, helping others and having a child involved in the program. The most common reason adults volunteer with 4-H is that they have a child enrolled in the program. Reasons for discontinuing service as a volunteer include feeling unappreciated, not getting help and not having enough time.

Volunteers want to align themselves with an organization they value and that is valued in the community. In order for people to make the decision to commit their time and talents, they must be satisfied with the organization and their role within it. Essential elements identified in successful volunteer-led programs include: clear policies and procedures; orientations and trainings; a safe and supportive environment; and involving volunteers in setting goals and measuring outcomes so they can see how they have helped the organization succeed. Volunteers also expect an organization to be structured and organized and one in which there is open communication among members and staff. Ongoing support and communication between paid staff and volunteers is important in retaining volunteer involvement.

The following is an overview of a study conducted by the authors with 31 parents who had children enrolled in 4-H and who were not enrolled as adult volunteers. Findings indicated that parents look for a program that offers a safe and fun learning

environment for youth, and one that is organized and welcoming to family involvement. Once these elements are evident in a program, parents are more apt to volunteer their time in support of their child's involvement.

Essential Elements for 4-H Parent Involvement

Four overarching themes, listed in order of importance, emerged from the data. An unanticipated theme regarding participants' concept of volunteering is also discussed as it relates to implications for involving parents as volunteers. Parents consider the following elements when evaluating whether to volunteer with a youth organization:

Is it a safe place in which youth learn while having fun?

Parents want their children to be safe and have fun while learning. They look for a youth organization that is a good fit for their children and for their families. If their kids are interested and enjoy the



program, parents are more inclined to volunteer in supportive roles that bring the family together. Parents also seek an organization that allows their children to excel and feel good about their own accomplishments and those of other youth.

Do youth have relationships with and support from other adults who care about them?

Building relationships with other adults who care about youth is an important aspect in volunteering. Parents want to know that their kids are benefiting from other caring adults and that there is a sharing of responsibilities among adults. It is important for parents to know that once they begin volunteering their time, they will have the support of others and won't be expected to take on major responsibilities by themselves. Working with others in a cooperative effort makes their involvement fun and meaningful.

Is there organization, structure and communication?

Parents need clear expectations regarding their volunteer role. They want to know what to expect of the organization and what the organization expects of them. This means there must be adequate training, open communication and others to call upon for guidance and collaboration. Organization, structure and communication are key factors in not only keeping families involved with an organization but, most importantly, in the initial decision to have the family become involved in the program. Parents expect timely notice and information of upcoming events and activities and how they can become involved. These events and activities must be organized and offer an efficient use of their time.

Will we be able to do things as a family?

With the time constraints of work, family, church and other activities, it is vital that the organization encourages family involvement. Volunteering should not be something that takes parents away from the family; it should be something that adds to the family.

What is the meaning of volunteering?

Although participants in the study were identified as being parents of a 4-H member and were not

enrolled as a volunteer, many of the parents were volunteering their time with the program. They may not have considered it a formal arrangement and submitted enrollment forms, but many participants shared stories of how they had provided some type of support for the club in which their child was involved. As one parent said, "I have not been a volunteer, but I have supported my friends who have chosen to volunteer by assisting with activities or helping to drive kids places they need to be."

Attracting and Keeping Volunteers

The following suggestions are based upon the findings of the study. These are important factors to consider in attracting and keeping volunteers.

Provide a safe, fun learning environment.

Safety is a concern when selecting a program for children. Programs should include an adult screening process and appropriate risk management training, and program literature should convey that these practices are in place. It is important to offer a balance of fun, hands-on, experiential activities where youth can make friends while learning new skills. The program must keep the interest of the youth in order for parents to devote time to supporting their child's involvement.

Youth need to have a sense of ownership of the program. Parents want a program in which their children develop independence and have a voice in determining the goals and direction of the program. The club or group environment makes a difference. Youth need an opportunity to hold an office, experience leadership and followership, and learn to make group decisions.

Develop relationships and provide support.

It is important that the responsibility for youth success is shared by families and club leadership; therefore, training, support and resources are needed for club leaders to recruit parents to become actively involved in supporting their child's involvement. One way to do this is to use language that acknowledges the role of parents as volunteers, even though they may not be enrolled or see themselves as volunteers. Make sure events and trainings are welcoming to parent volunteer participation (e.g.,

avoid using terms like *leader* trainings, *leader* luncheons, *leaders* councils).

Volunteers in leadership roles should be visible within the program. A certificate signed by a key volunteer with whom a parent works closely may be more meaningful than receiving a certificate signed by an administrator with whom the volunteer may have had little or no personal contact.

Provide clear organization, structure and communication.

It is important that volunteers be involved in development of an annual calendar of events, and, more importantly, they need to know not only when and where events will take place, but who among them is involved in providing leadership and support to each event. Planning and scheduling events and activities can be accomplished through a planning retreat involving volunteers and paid staff, newsletters, surveys, or social media and related tools. Parents deserve to be involved in planning what will be done and they need to know why they are doing it. Demonstrating a connection between a fun activity and its benefit is essential.

When prospective volunteers meet with staff for orientation, they need to know what is expected of them and what they can expect from staff. Staff can help volunteers with setting goals and offer relevant training and workshops to provide information on how to follow the curriculum to reach goals, job descriptions for volunteer positions, contest guidelines and other related topics. Items such as a volunteer handbook and policy manual should be readily available so that individuals know where to go if they have a question. An informal mentoring system is a valuable tool in connecting new volunteers with more experienced volunteers. A web presence is a must in today's society, providing quick access to information, training, resources and online discussion groups. It is imperative that information is current and reflects the involvement of parents as volunteers.

Customer service and how the office responds to phone calls and emails are critical components of communication. Staff should be well-versed in the

program or know with whom the person should be speaking for further information. Event registration and information should be readily available to those answering phones as well as to the public via website, newsletter, email or other forms of communication. If you are unsure of the impression conveyed to those seeking information from your program office, ask someone you know to call or stop by as a potential volunteer and have them share their first impressions with you.

Encourage doing things as a family.

People enjoy doing things together as a family and may look for volunteer opportunities that involve the whole family instead of volunteer service that takes them away from the family. It helps to have a family-oriented, community approach that encourages the family to learn together. A family night, family camp or family community service activities can serve to enhance the connection between youth and parents.

Address the concept of volunteering.

Some parents may hesitate to enroll formally in a volunteer program. Formal enrollment may imply an expectation to take on a larger role without help from others. Program administrators may need to rethink the assumption that if there is no regular contact with parents of members, they must not be actively volunteering with the program. Key volunteers should be encouraged to ask parents to help out with the club or group in small ways and enroll these parents as volunteers. Provide key volunteers with resources for not only recruiting parents but also recognizing parents for their involvement. Supportive parents are integral to the program.

Conclusion

Having a child in the program is a strong motivation for parents to volunteer. Providing a well-run, organized youth program that offers a safe and fun, learning environment invites family involvement. Ongoing support and communication between volunteers and paid staff demonstrates a sense of community and shared responsibility for youth success.

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