

Youth Programs Make A Difference

Study reveals three resources must be available for youths to succeed: mentoring, long-term adult interaction and access to structured programs outside of school.

by **Martha Filipic**

A national study showing the worth of high-quality youth development programs demonstrates the significance of the benefits for the 300,000 young Ohioans involved in 4-H, says Ryan Schmiesing, who helps lead the program for Ohio State University (OSU) Extension.

“The study confirms for us that 4-H makes a difference,” says Schmiesing, co-state 4-H leader and assistant director of OSU Extension. “For the first time, we have evidence that positive youth development can be

measured, and we know what elements need to be present for that to take place. And, we know 4-H has all of those elements.”

Schmiesing discussed the results of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, sponsored by the National 4-H Council and conducted by Richard Lerner of Tufts University. The longitudinal study followed more than 4,000 youth in 25 states to measure five characteristics of positive youth development: competence, confidence, connection, character and caring. Lerner found that the more time youth spend participating in structured programs and activities outside of school — in programs such as 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Boys & Girls Clubs — the more likely they are to experience positive youth development and contribute to their communities.

“The study shows that three resources must be available for youths to succeed — mentoring, long-term adult interaction and access to structured programs outside of school — and Ohio 4-H gives youths those opportunities,” Schmiesing says. “We have a very strong volunteer core, about 30,000

volunteers throughout the state, and the study shows that they make a difference.”

Lerner, who is also the author of *The Good Teen: Rescuing Adolescence from the Myths of the Storm and Stress Years* (Crown Publishers, October 2007), measured positive youth development by examining whether children and teens selected positive, healthy goals for themselves; identified and used available opportunities to reach their goals; and how they adjusted when goals were not met.

In addition, he found that successful youth

development programs:

- ▶ provide educational opportunities in an environment that supports long-term, productive interactions between adults and youth;
- ▶ emphasize skill-building;
- ▶ reflect the diversity of interests of the youth involved;
- ▶ emphasize both promotion of positive behaviors and prevention of risk behaviors; and
- ▶ encourage youth participation and leadership.

Schmiesing was heartened by results from the fourth year of the study, which showed that eighth-graders in 4-H are far more likely than youths in other programs to exhibit strong civic engagement.

“I think it’s because we emphasize community service and because we have a lot of 4-H members serving in leadership roles,” Schmiesing says. “One of the strengths of 4-H is to give members opportunities to get involved and practice positive decision-making.

“These results show that what we’re doing is more than just planning events and holding programs,” he continues. “It shows those events and programs are very, very important for individual growth.”

Schmiesing adds that two new Ohio studies could provide additional information on the effect of 4-H involvement. One is a study by Extension educator and doctoral student Deb Lewis examining 4-H involvement among fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders. The other is a study by Kristi Lekies, OSU Extension state specialist in leadership development and program evaluation, who is surveying 1,500 ninth- and 12th-graders on workforce preparation, including teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills.

“There has been a lot of concern in recent years about young people coming out of high school and even college without the skills they need to succeed in the workforce,” Lekies says. “I want to gain more of an understanding on what teens perceive as their own levels of skills in these areas, what 4-H has done to help them build those skills, and what we can do to improve our programming in this area.”

Lekies, who is also an assistant professor in Ohio State’s Department of Human and Community Resource Development, plans to complete the study in the first half of 2008.

4-H is a community of young people across America who are learning leadership, citizenship, and life skills. Children and teens from age 5 and in kindergarten through age 19 may participate in 4-H. Contact your county office of Extension or see www.4husa.org for more information.



Editor’s Note: Martha Filipic is technical editor for OSU’s News and Media Relations. More information on the Tufts 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development is available online from the National 4-H Council at www.fourhcouncil.edu/newsroom.aspx.

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