

Mentoring Youth in 4-H

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Take a look in the mirror and describe what you see. You are alive and well. You love who you are, being successful by your own definition. Your presence commands respect from others. You are admired in all that you do and it feels wonderful! But if people only knew the “old you.” If only they knew how insecure you once were; how unloved you felt; the low level of self-confidence you reflected. Well, they don’t have to know, because that was indeed the past. The “new you” took hold and it’s all because someone cared enough to recognize and tap the potential that you possessed inside.

Many people can relate to the situation described above. Whether you moved from a position of mediocrity to the rank of president, from being depressed to being a dignitary, we can all identify at least one person who lit the fire that ignited our passion to become everything that we are. It’s no secret; mentoring does make a difference! Take a look at any thriving young person today and there is evidence that an adult role model has made an impact. Connecting a caring adult with a young person can change destructive behavior into positive energy. While some youth tend to emulate the qualities of their mentors, others develop a sense of awareness and feelings of self-worth that may not have previously been apparent. A vast majority of young people develop the desire to exhibit affirming behaviors, which are critical to becoming constructive, responsible adults.

The research on mentoring has been extensive; from findings revealing the impact of one-on-one mentoring to the benefits available to those youth involved in group mentoring settings. Many organizations have explored ways to capitalize on the principles of this form of a positive youth-adult relationship. With 4-H relying on the work of volunteers, this organization is no exception. This publication provides information on how to make sure those good volunteers are also great mentors for the youth they encounter.

Many states around the country are making efforts to ensure that youth are getting the most out of 4-H youth development programs. The most notable initiatives have focused on the use of mentoring as a promising advancement toward achieving positive youth development. Research not only supports this endeavor, but also connects the change in family structure as an influential factor on youth development. As more American households are being headed by single-parent homes, there is also an increase in the number of families where both parents are working full time. As a result, young people are spending less quality time with adults. Kentucky is no exception. The need for positive, caring adults who are passionate about the well-being of young people are in higher demand than ever before.

*I no longer search for people
I want to be...I decided to
become her!*

Jessica Care Moore
(Poet)

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When considering the age range of youth, all 4-Hers (ages 9 to 19) can benefit from mentoring. Establishing meaningful relationships with youth to aid in developing their interpersonal, communication, and academic skills is a fundamental approach. However, emphasis must be placed on their families as well. Having little or no buy-in from parents most often results in low participation from the young person.

There is no specific prototype of the young person who needs mentoring. All young people are susceptible to certain risk factors and, therefore, can be enhanced by a positive experience where adults serve as nurturing role models. However, to maximize this effort, youth must be consistently involved. The most effective level of involvement in a mentoring program is when the youth:

- Meets/communicates three to four times each month with mentor
- Attends monthly 4-H related activities
- Attends Extension-sponsored programs (e.g., health fairs, family night) along with their family
- Has a desire to be mentored (not forcing participation upon youth and/or their families)

Mentors should be committed to development of youth in all capacities (e.g., physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially). The goal is for youth to receive positive experiences that lead to success through lifelong learning. Moreover, many mentors see their relationship with a 4-H member as a form of giving back to those who helped them enhance their lives. Not only do the youth and their families benefit, but the mentor is often rewarded with the personal satisfaction of making a difference in his or her community. Although there is a level of dedication required, many find it worth their time.

The most suitable mentors are those who:

- Display personal enjoyment when working with youth
- Participate voluntarily
- Set realistic, but high expectations of youth
- Encourage positive behaviors
- Inform parents of their child's abilities and progress
- Engage families in programs and projects
- Are able to relate to the families on a personal level
- Are accessible to youth (personally, emotionally, geographically)
- Have positive attitudes toward the 4-H program

Although it is an additional benefit for a mentor to have a 4-H background, this should not be a requirement. The main qualification is to have a committed desire to help youth advance in all aspects and achieve positive developmental outcomes. Mentors should make at least a one-year commitment to youth. This timeframe should be best served with the mentor performing duties such as:

- Supporting and guiding youth in exploring 4-H projects
- Presenting the 4-Her and his or her family with what can be expected from the mentor/mentee relationship
- Informing the youth/parents of the mentor's commitment to the relationship
- Helping youth recognize their skills and talents
- Assisting the family in identifying learning and skill-building opportunities
- Joining family members in celebrating their child's accomplishments
- Encouraging the family to take part in 4-H and Extension-related activities
- Challenging youth, while offering encouragement and support
- Assisting in planning 4-H events
- Volunteering for 4-H activities (e.g., judge contests, attend camp)

Expectations of Mentors

As a premier youth development organization, Kentucky 4-H holds in high regard the purpose of enhancing the lives of young people. However, this cannot be achieved without caring adults who are desirous of making this a reality. If adults are to serve as mentors to 4-Hers and their families, certain expectations should apply. Adults serving as mentors to 4-H youth should:

- Explain what the 4-H member can expect from the mentor
- Encourage both the 4-H member and his or her family to take an active role in the mentoring process
- Assure youth that the mentor is available to assist whenever possible
- Establish a level of trust between youth and the mentor to keep communication lines open
- Meet (face-to-face) with the 4-H member at least twice per month to review/assist in 4-H projects or activities; the mentor should communicate with the mentee (via phone, email, etc.) at least once a week
- Reassure the 4-H member of the advantages to working with others and participating in 4-H events/activities
- Work within 4-H guidelines and policies

Mentoring within county 4-H programs contributes to the essentials in a young person's life by meeting specific needs. Some of those needs include: personal development (providing guidance in the acquisition of social skill sets, decision-making, and healthy living), academics (helping youth develop intellectually and attain success in school), and career awareness/workforce preparation (preparing youth for the world of work). Furthermore, the relevance of mentoring can be understood even more so when observing the importance through the scope of the four H's; thus incorporating principles utilizing "Head, Heart, Hands, and Health."

While most counties in Kentucky have not implemented mentoring as a customary practice, such an initiative can support the expansion of existing county programs, including maximizing the use of dedicated staff and volunteers. This non-traditional mode of promoting 4-H can also serve as an opportunity to reach out to audiences who



Mentoring and 4-H

Head

Mentors have the role of helping youth develop critical thinking and pertinent decision-making skills.

Heart

With young people often experiencing "emotional roller coasters," mentors can help them to become more in tune with their feelings. Youth can learn from mentors how to build character within while also developing the wherewithal to show empathy for others. Mentors may also assist families in dealing with the various ages and stages of their children, particularly during adolescence, also known as the "storm and stress" years.

Hands

Caring adults (mentors) teach youth skills that are useful in everyday life. Families are also encouraged to participate in the "learn by doing" philosophy.

Health

Mentors may assist youth and their families achieve healthy lifestyles and educate them on the consequences that follow when young people make unhealthy choices.

are not currently engaged under current structures (e.g., clubs, project groups). Whether one-on-one or a group approach, mentoring can help take programs to those youth and families that may benefit tremendously with what Kentucky 4-H has to offer.

Kentucky 4-H is not only endowed with having a host of devoted volunteers, but also young people who never cease to amaze with their talents and abilities. The time has come to consider connecting youth and adults in ways that can build relationships, thus extending strong social ties within communities. Capitalizing on those existing 4-H projects and activities is a viable option when seeking ways to connect youth and adults, especially underserved audiences.

Kentucky 4-H already provides an infrastructure that supports the development and operation of effective mentoring programs. The Kentucky Youth Protections and Risk Management Standards provide strategies that can be easily adapted to warrant an effective mentoring experience. The Youth Protections standards are useful in constructing a selection and screening process for prospective mentors. The existing volunteer training can also be modified to support training for mentors and the staff members providing assistance. Several states have also used the *Step Up To Leadership* curriculum (4HCCS BU-07903 and 4-HCCS BU-07904) as a resource for mentoring.

Whether you know young people in your county with few positive adults in their lives or you just want to promote positive youth-adult relationships, then a mentoring project may be for you. Below are the beginning steps to getting a mentoring program started.

1. Ask the important questions:

Who is your target population (youth, families)? Who will be recruited as mentors? Is the need already being met (by another organization in your community)? What impact do you plan to make? What resources (time, money, facilities) are necessary? What resources are available?

2. Effective mentoring is very rewarding, but it can be demanding work for those involved in the planning and implementation.

Once the questions have been answered, determine the needs of youth and their families in your community (i.e., conducting a needs assessment). At this time, you should be able to determine any unmet needs of youth and whether your county has the resources to meet these needs (i.e., asset mapping).

3. You will want to plan ahead for specific activities.

Most mentors are doing their best at managing several things, from a full-time job to children of their own. As with any volunteer, make sure they have adequate assistance to perform their expected tasks. Keep them informed of all events and provide resources whenever possible.

4. Make certain that you specify a time frame in which mentors must commit (at least one year is best). Beginning a mentoring relationship with a young person, then quitting after a few months has been shown to do more harm than if that young person had no mentor at all.

5. Take your recruitment and screening process seriously. Stages of particular importance are: youth selection/orientation; mentor recruitment, screening, orientation, and training; matching mentors and mentees; requirements/methods of encouraging parental involvement; monitoring mentor/mentee relationships; and sustainability.

6. Take time to formatively evaluate. That is, be sure to monitor the program from beginning to end to determine if things are going well. If they are not, then you should prepare to make changes immediately. Not only will a thorough evaluation help to refine and improve the program, it will also demonstrate success and a model for others to follow.

Don't spend too much time re-creating the wheel. There are numerous resources available to aid in developing successful mentoring programs. The following Web sites are great supplements to this publication. In addition, they include resources for those wanting to learn more about strategies that aid in establishing and maintaining meaningful mentoring programs for any county.

- Public/Private Ventures (www.ppv.org)
- Child Trends (<http://www.childtrends.org/>)
- MENTOR (<http://www.mentoring.org/>)
- National Mentoring Center (<http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/index.php>)

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