

EMPOWERMENT OF OTHERS

Positive Youth Development Domain

4-H empowers youth to reach their full potential while working and learning in partnership with caring adults. The mission of 4-H is to provide meaningful opportunities for all youth and adults to work together to create sustainable community change⁴. To accomplish this, adults must create a space for young people to have some control over their environment. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, empower means to give authority or power to; to enable; to promote self-awareness or influence. There are many ways volunteers can use their own authority to create opportunities for youth to have a voice and build a sense of ownership.

The Search Institute⁵ has identified empowerment as one of eight developmental assets children need to have to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. They suggest the following external assets will support youth empowerment.

- Community values youth - Young people feel valued and appreciated by adults.
- Youth as resources - Young people contribute to decisions and are given useful roles in the community.
- Service to others - Young people have opportunities to help others in the community.
- Safety - Young people feel safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

One way for the 4-H community to value its youth is by having adults validate a young person's emotions. Emotional management is part of emotional intelligence, a key social

skill needed throughout life. Emotions that arise from events that are disappointing, frustrating, or unfair can be quite strong. Adults should help youth explore their powerful emotions rather than hide their feelings or express them in negative ways, which helps youth attain the thriving indicator "positive emotionality"². Assure youth that their emotions are real and they matter. Help youth see the situation from a different perspective, and that perhaps it is not about the outcome, it's about the process. If we can help youth understand their emotions and trust themselves to react in an appropriate way, it can build their self-confidence.

The level of responsibility shared between adults and youth represents the single most important factor that affects youth voice in the decision making process⁶.

Empowerment is not simply sharing power and delegating. According to Busing³, 4-H volunteers have a personal impact on the individual members of a group, and also influence the type of climate in which the group operates. For elementary aged children, they suggest making a conscious effort to provide:

- Several opportunities to make choices or decisions
- Continuous opportunities to ask questions
- Acknowledgement of youth's ideas
- A commitment to try the children's ideas and work as a team
- Allowance for autonomy and shared responsibility

When adults create opportunities for self-directed behavior, the practice can

reinforce a young person's confidence and competency to handle different situations³.

Throughout adolescence, the goal of 4-H is to develop youth to lead themselves. Having a token youth on an adult committee, or asking youth to participate in menial decision making is not enough to empower youth to think and act independently. According to Anderson & Sandmann¹ adults need to create a structure that encourages self-efficacy, which refers to a person's belief that they can accomplish what they set out to do. For instance, a student has high self-efficacy if they take on a challenging job, with little experience, convinced they'll succeed. Empowerment is optimized when jobs and assignments are challenging, meaningful and allow some freedom. Anderson & Sandmann¹ identified five key practices that youth practitioners can implement to create an environment that fosters empowerment and leadership in youth.

- Foster Self-Efficacy: Increase a member's belief in their capabilities to perform responsibilities.
- Create Conditions for Action: Increase a member's understanding of how responsibilities fit into the mission and goals of the situation.
- Structure the Task: Set boundaries for members to carry out responsibilities and decision making.

- Create a Sense of Ownership: Increase the degree to which members understand they are in charge of how the work gets done.
- Coaching for Performance: Actively support members as they work to achieve their goals. This may include providing appropriate resources and training.

Youth-adult partnerships are essential to building an environment that supports youth empowerment. It is also important that youth mentors be aware if there is an imbalance between the youth's identity and self-worth and the community in which they live. A positive sense of self is difficult to maintain when a youth does not feel valued, valuable or safe⁷. Volunteers may need to help youth identify their "sparks" since they are a key source of hope and purpose for many youth. Club voting, service learning, stopping bullying, and leadership opportunities are just a few ways youth can have an influence over their environment. Show youth a pathway to the future, how to use their voice and ways they can make a difference in the world².

References

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