

developing responsible citizens

Richard W. Hill

A major goal of Extension 4-H youth programs is developing responsible citizens. How this goal is accomplished in the 80s rests in the answers to these questions:

- Is there need for special attention to the development of responsible people at this time?
- What is responsible behavior in a democratic setting?
- How are attitudes of responsibility developed?
- How might 4-H projects and activities best contribute to the growth of responsibility among its participants?

Is There a Need?

Substantial evidence of irresponsibility among adults exists. There's a growing problem from inappropriate disposal of chemical wastes by industry, sometimes due to ignorance and at other times indifference. Who hasn't heard of the disaster resulting from the introduction of a fire retardant chemical into the feed supply of dairy cattle in Michigan? What percentage of the population voted in the 1980 elections? In your community, what portion of the citizens have attended a meeting of the school board, the county or township governing body, or the city council? These and other similar questions indicate the need for greater adult responsibility at every level of our society.

But irresponsibility isn't limited to adults. Recently one rural Michigan community reported the irresponsible actions of young people. Following a rock concert attended by over 5,000 people, 3 young people were killed and 6 injured in a car accident. Liquor sales to minors were alleged. The concert also subjected neighboring residents to excessive noise, objectionable language, and trespassing on their property.

In another rural town, in that county, meetings of the city council had been dominated by complaints about teenagers "hanging out" on the main street late at night. The result

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was damage to store fronts and excessive trash to be cleaned daily at store openings.

These samples of adult and youth irresponsibility can be duplicated elsewhere. More responsibility will be required if we're to live peaceably together within our communities and nations, and around the world. Many children do grow up behaving responsibly. Many adults are responsible citizens. What's the difference? What's responsible behavior?

What's Responsible Behavior?

For this discussion, let's define responsible people as those who:

are self-confident, self-accepting, and self-directing. They participate in their social settings in individual and unique ways with caring concern for the well-being of themselves and their fellow citizens. The social setting may be the family, the organization, the job, the community, the state, the school, the nation, or even world level interactions.

This definition came from several sources. Fingarette says that it's acceptable for one not to care too much about the outcome of a game of bridge or tennis, but it's not acceptable to not care about the outcome of certain other actions. If we're healthy and rational people, we must be held accountable for doing physical or mental injury to another person. We're morally responsible when we injure, inconvenience, or impose hardships on others.¹

In experimental studies about democracy and autocracy, White and Lippitt identified several psychological conditions that foster the development and maintenance of a democratic social system. Self-acceptance and self-confidence in initiating one's own contributions and expressing one's own needs are among those conditions.² Whiting and Whiting support the notion that there's a nurturant dimension to responsible behavior; a regard for the well-being of others. Their work suggests a source for that nurturant caring dimension.

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How Attitudes Developed?

So, how are attitudes of responsibility developed? It's the intrinsic nature of the rewards associated with certain responsible jobs often performed by children at an early age that helps develop feelings of regard for the needs of others. The intrinsic rewards of task performance spring from the feeling of competence generated and from identification with

adults. Children envy the privileges of adult status. They gain satisfaction and pleasure from gardening if that's an important part of the mother's work or from herding if that is what fathers do.

An interesting conclusion from Whitings' work is that unless children learn to care by caring for others before age nine, they may never develop the feeling of nurturant care and concern for others.³ Fingarette says that the child eventually becomes a responsible person by being treated more and more like one.⁴ Matteson stresses that a need exists for youth to work beside adults who will encourage them to share in responsibilities and decision making.⁵

Family settings that provide these kinds of interactions and activities aren't as prevalent in 1981 as in previous generations. The labor of children has become less necessary to society. The help of 4-H and other community youth organizations may be needed as never before if certain kinds of responsibility-developing experiences are to be provided for growing children.

Coleman points out that though school has expanded to fill the time once occupied by other activities, it doesn't fully substitute for them. Those other activities of children and young people once included the opportunity for responsible action. At times they had authority over situations that affected other people. Young people experienced consequences of their actions and were strengthened by facing them.⁶

Coleman identifies three areas that seem to provide less opportunity for development of responsibility than in previous generations. They include age segregation among children and youth, adult-youth segregation, and the changing balance between protection and opportunity. Various laws have been designed to protect young people from or within the world of work, but they make it difficult for increasing numbers of children and youth to experience activities that would help growth and development. They enforce isolation of youth from adults and from adult-like responsibilities.

Also, Coleman believes that the rights of youth to protection and the rights of youth to opportunity are unbalanced in the direction of too little opportunity.⁷ The relative absence of role relations that include responsibility of youth for younger children is a serious gap in the experiences society owes its youth.⁸

From this brief look at the literature, you can conclude there's a need for additional attention to the subject. It's apparent that the developmental years of many children lack the kinds of experiences that promise to help them become

responsible people. An appropriate environment for the development of responsible behavior would provide: (1) a chance for children to feel that others depend on them and that their contributions are needed; (2) opportunity, at every age level, for children to have a voice in decisions that affect them; (3) experiences that permit children to be with, observe, and help adults at work and play; and (4) adequate chance for age integration among children and youth.

How Can 4-H Help?

How might 4-H projects and activities best contribute to the provision of such environments for increasing numbers of children and youth? The challenge and the opportunity is to make sure, if possible, that every project and activity is consistent with the four environmental conditions listed above. If it's not possible for each educational effort to meet all 4 of the conditions, it's important that within the total 4-H experience of each participant, the 4 conditions be met. A serious attempt, by 4-H programming, to meet this challenge and to accept it as an opportunity might well mean:

1. The virtual elimination of a beginning age requirement, reflecting the Whiting concern for the extreme importance of the early years to the development of responsible behavior.
2. Attaching more importance to how programs, projects, and activities are planned and conducted than to what's included.
3. That decisions and tasks are generally made and carried out by younger, less-experienced participants, with the older, more-experienced, and more capable serving in support and training roles.
4. Developing the attitude that every participant, regardless of age, is expected to have a part in the planning and conducting of everything that affects him/her. (This attitude should apply to a single local club event and to the most important county, state, or national activity.)
5. Expanding the chance for the very young to teach others, though it might mean redefining terms like 4-H advisor and 4-H leader to include all who advise and lead, regardless of age.

Building Extension 4-H youth programs along these guidelines should help both younger and older participants to be responsible citizens, *not just become* responsible people at some later date. It's important to keep in mind the following statement by Konopka:

Mistakes in two opposite directions can easily be made (too much restriction or too much leniency). They can be diminished by a determined effort on the part of those who work with youth to use available knowledge and not be swayed by emotions. To make this possible we need first of all a community climate which says "yes" to youth—neither by idolizing it nor by fearing it, but by accepting youth as a significant partner with rights and responsibilities, with opportunities for development and genuine participation in the making of society—a never ending task.⁹

Footnotes

1. Herbert Fingarette, *On Responsibility* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1967), p. 36.
2. Ralph K. White and Ronald Lippitt, *Autocracy and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), pp. 244-45.
3. Beatrice B. Whiting and John W. M. Whiting, *Children of Six Cultures* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Press, 1975), pp. 179-80.
4. Fingarette, *On Responsibility*, p. 40.
5. David R. Matteson, *Adolescence Today* (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1975), p. 221.
6. James S. Coleman and others, *Youth: Transition to Adulthood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. vii.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
9. Gisela Konopka, *The Adolescent Girl in Conflict* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 125.