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Moving Beyond the Program: Incorporating Healthy Living Behaviors Throughout 4-H

Abstract

A recent national needs assessment of 4-H professionals and volunteers described the need to incorporate a holistic view of healthy living throughout all 4-H programs, thereby promoting healthy lifestyles in all clubs, camps, conferences, projects, events, etc. This commentary issues a challenge to optimize the 4-H environment for healthy living and provides practical ideas to achieve that greater vision, *for better living*.

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Lerner and colleagues (2009) have consistently found that youth who participated in 4-H programs practiced healthier behaviors compared to youth who participated in similar programs. These behaviors included lower levels of substance abuse and higher levels of physical activity and healthier diets. However, like youth in the larger society, youth in 4-H still are at risk for health-related concerns such as obesity and accidental injury. In response to these risks, 4-H remains committed to its efforts to promote healthy behaviors in youth through 4-H Healthy Living programs.

National Needs Assessment

A needs assessment was conducted with 4-H professionals and volunteers with the goal of identifying the training and professional development needs related to improving 4-H Healthy Living Programs. A modified Delphi technique was used to collect feedback from 37 4-H professionals and volunteers. These groups consisted of the following types of respondents from across the country: Extension Deans and Directors, 4-H state and local professionals, both adult and young adult (18 – 21 years) 4-H volunteers, and healthy living partners/stakeholders. A major recommendation from respondents

was the need to incorporate a holistic idea of healthy living throughout all 4-H programs—in other words, to promote healthy living behaviors as part of the 4-H experience and not just one aspect of programming (Donaldson, Franck, Toman, & Moody, 2013). Respondents suggested concrete ideas for incorporating healthy behaviors into 4-H programming, such as providing healthy meal options at events and identifying tips for healthy eating as well as more global ideas such as the need to translate current research into effective programs (Table 1).

Table 1.
Top Healthy Living Needs Identified by Respondents

| Healthy Living Needs | Respondent Group |
|---|---------------------------|
| Identify strategies that integrate healthy practices into all aspects of 4-H programming | State 4-H Professionals |
| Identify strategies to empower youth to promote and adopt healthy living practices | State 4-H Professionals |
| Provide healthy options for food, activities, and environments at 4-H events and educational opportunities | Partners |
| Integrate positive health outcomes into existing 4-H youth development activities and programs | Partners |
| Develop a multi-disciplinary approach incorporating agriculture and health issues, healthy eating, menu planning and cooking competitions | Extension Deans/Directors |
| Tips for easy healthy living | Volunteers |
| Ability to translate healthy eating research and knowledge into practices | Partners |

Creating a Healthier Environment

As discussed by Hill and colleagues (2009), health is an active process rather than a state, and individuals and communities must continually practice these behaviors. The mission of 4-H Healthy Living programs is to provide knowledge and skills related to nutrition and physical fitness, substance abuse prevention, safety and injury prevention, and social and emotional wellness for youth as described on the National 4-H Council website (<http://www.4-h.org/youth-development-programs/kids-health/>). As mentioned previously, studies of youth in 4-H have found many positive outcomes related to participation, including positive outcomes related to healthy living behaviors (Lerner & Lerner, 2009; Seevers, Hodnett, & Van Leeuwen, 2011). However, in a study of 4-H alumni, respondents rated stress management, healthy lifestyle choices, conflict resolution, personal safety, and disease prevention as the five life skills *least* influenced by 4-H participation (Maass, Wilken, Jordan, Culen, & Place, 2006), indicating the importance of continuing to highlight these programs and behaviors. To optimize healthy outcomes, a supportive 4-H environment that incorporates healthy

living across all programs would serve to reinforce positive behaviors and provide an important foundation for continued healthy behaviors throughout the lifespan of 4-H members.

Many 4-H programs include aspects of healthy living, such as outdoor activities, cooking skills, and campaigns against bullying and substance abuse. Some aspects of the 4-H environment have embraced healthy living, such as tobacco-free camps and campuses and active promotion of injury prevention programs, such as ATV and firearms safety. However, there are some aspects of the 4-H environment and culture that could benefit from a healthy makeover.

For example, it can be difficult for youth to achieve and maintain healthy eating if available snacks and meals limit healthy options or if fast food eating is promoted as an acceptable meal alternative. Also, primarily sedentary activities can inhibit youth from reaching minimal time spent in daily physical activity (Strong et al., 2005). In addition to 4-H youth dealing with these issues, 4-H staff and volunteers can also struggle with regular physical activity and healthy eating (Ensle, 2005; Smith, Keel, & Ballard, 2000). Incorporating healthy living behaviors throughout the 4-H environment would support healthier behaviors for everyone involved in 4-H, from youth to 4-H professionals, volunteers, and parents of 4-H members. There is evidence that youth are more likely to adopt healthy behaviors if these behaviors are modeled and encouraged by positive adult role models, so this would be an additional reinforcement for participating youth (van der Horst et al., 2007).

Continued attention to increasing healthy behaviors and incorporating these behaviors throughout 4-H programming would help strengthen those programs and the positive outcomes related to 4-H membership. From this study it is clear that 4-H professionals and volunteers recognize the importance of incorporating healthy living behaviors throughout 4-H and that these behaviors would help to strengthen the mission of 4-H.

Some recommendations for incorporating these healthy living behaviors throughout 4-H programming would be:

- Offering healthy snacks,
- Offering fruit for dessert and only offering sugary foods for special occasions,
- Offering water instead of sodas,
- Limiting salty foods,
- Making physical activity a part of all programs—for sedentary programs offering and encouraging physical activity breaks where program goals or outcomes could be discussed or youth could actively brainstorm while walking or doing other simple activities,
- Using peer leaders to identify and discourage bullying behaviors during programs,
- Helping professionals and volunteers to identify when youth are struggling with emotional or behavioral issues and to identify resources to help youth and their families deal with these issues,

- Selecting fund development activities that are consistent with healthy lifestyles, and
- Electing a healthy lifestyle officer in local 4-H clubs to lead physical activities at meetings.

The Challenge

The study reported here reflected that 4-H professionals and volunteers are interested in encouraging healthy behaviors throughout 4-H programming. 4-H youth are ideal agents for change for the program and should be included as leaders who could help plan and implement organizational and institutional changes related to healthy living.

When members pledge their "health to better living" and then expend their time and energy to sell candy bars for a 4-H fundraising project, it sends a very inconsistent message about human health. The challenge is to move beyond only programming and apply health more broadly to all 4-H environments (camps, conferences, projects, activities, etc.). Can 4-H make encouraging and nurturing healthy lifestyles the *way it does business* in all that it does? If the answer is yes, the results will be happy, healthy children and youth who have the opportunity for remarkable futures.

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