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A Time Like No Other: 4-H Youth Development and COVID-19

Abstract

In this thought leader commentary, we review the potential devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, including trauma, impacts on mental health, socioemotional distress, and changes in academic learning. Stating that 4-H is uniquely positioned to mitigate these effects through intentional positive youth development efforts, we present a call to action for 4-H educators and Extension administrators as we move from initial reaction to recovery and beyond. We recommend four research-based strategies to ensure that youths not only survive, but thrive, in this time like no other.

Keywords: [COVID-19](#), [youth development](#), [trauma](#), [developmental relationships](#)

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COVID-19 has affected virtually all aspects of everyday life. Although the full effects of the global pandemic have yet to be realized, one thing we know for sure is that children and adolescents will be affected in ways that will mark the course of their life-long development (Bartlett & Virette, 2020). Young people are dealing with changes to family life that could include parental job loss, isolation, financial strain and uncertainty, familial stress responses, and increased family substance abuse (Bartlett, Giffin, & Thomson, 2020). Moreover, many older adolescents were not able to experience important rites of passage such as high school graduation that signify an important transition to a new phase of life. Others are facing academic uncertainties, as well as evaporating employment opportunities, leaving them vulnerable at a key transition point in their lives.

Research has revealed the incredible resiliency young people often possess, especially when provided adequate support. But the enormity of the COVID-19 crisis presents the biggest test to date of their resilience, especially for those who were already disadvantaged before the pandemic began. The cumulative effect of the distress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to create a negative cascading

developmental impact on youth (Roehlkepartain & Blyth, 2020).

In short, the well-being of our nation's young people is in peril.

The Risks for Youths Are Real

The risks of not addressing the impact of COVID-19 on the positive development of youths are tremendous and real. First and foremost is the risk presented by trauma and its epigenetic and neural effects on youths, particularly at key developmental moments (Cantor, Osher, Berg, Steter, & Rose, 2019). Beyond trauma, isolation and the loss of relationships, daily routines, and social outlets can negatively affect mental health. We also know that most mental health disorders begin in childhood, and, left untreated, can have serious repercussions for child and adolescent health and well-being (Golberstein, Wen, & Miller, 2020).

Recent research from China addressing the effects of COVID-19 revealed that the pandemic has had a marked effect on the mental health of Chinese youths (Liang et al., 2020). In Italy, another virus hotspot, concerted efforts are being made to protect children from the effects of potential posttraumatic stress disorder related to COVID-19 (Roccella, 2020). Although the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth mental health in the United States is still unclear, the potential for widespread socioemotional distress is great, particularly related to worry about the health and safety of one's self and family (Cantor, 2020).

Finally, the impact of the pandemic on academic learning and skill development and learning loss is still being determined in light of the unprecedented movement from classroom to remote learning. Early estimates are that students will lose about 30% of the reading gains and over 50% of the math skills they had attained during the 2019–2020 school year (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). All these effects are magnified for youths who were experiencing trauma, systemic social inequity, and other disadvantages prior to the pandemic.

4-H Youth Development in the Time of COVID-19

In the best of times, 4-H has provided programming and support to ensure the positive development of young people. 4-H also has been there for youth in the worst of times, such as during the Great Depression, a time when 4-H played a crucial role in helping young people navigate the impact of urban migration to rural communities and the poverty and sociocultural strains that followed. It was during the 1930s that 4-H first emerged as a youth development organization, expanding its focus beyond teaching farming and homemaking skills to an emphasis on the larger socioemotional skills youths need for success. The resulting focus of 4-H as a youth development organization was further shaped by a new concentration on the adolescent years as an important time of development (Wessel & Wessel, 1982).

Today, guided by a burgeoning body of research, 4-H continues to evolve and adapt programming to support the ever-changing needs of young people. Research has shown that the assets young people possess and the contexts in which they live determine their positive development (Roehlkepartain & Blyth, 2020). Personal assets, including the constructive use of time, boundaries, commitment to learning, empowerment, and identity (Roehlkepartain & Blyth, 2020), are all threatened in the current environment. The contexts of a young person's life, including school, neighborhood socializing, sports, clubs, and other social activities, have all but disappeared. And one of the most essential aspects of these contexts, relationships with caring adults, has been curtailed or eliminated altogether, leaving young people without

the critical buffering support they need to navigate this new world. At the same time, we know that the single most important factor in developing resilience in the face of adversity is the presence of at least one stable, caring, and supportive caregiver, parent, or other adult (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, n.d.; McNeill, 2010).

The 4-H Solution

Consistent with its mission of positive youth development, the 4-H program is uniquely positioned to address and mitigate COVID-19 impacts on youths by focusing on building youth assets and providing supportive contexts. Unlike direct interventions for specific problems (e.g., mental health services and hunger reduction), 4-H addresses the multiple sociodevelopmental levels of the "whole child." This whole child approach is more critical than ever because of the deep impact of the COVID-19 event on multiple assets and contexts in youths' lives. Furthermore, research has shown that consistent participation in organized youth activities is associated with increased positive development (Agans et al., 2014), reflecting the urgent need to pivot 4-H programs to work in this new reality in order to keep vital programming momentum and participation moving forward.

Seemingly overnight, 4-H faculty and staff have adapted traditional programs for innovative delivery. Educators have worked hard to produce virtual and no-contact activities and rearrange planned gatherings and events. They also are struggling to address summer programming, including camps and fairs, and exploring ways to provide meaningful alternatives to these summer 4-H hallmarks. The enormity of this task reflects the commitment 4-H educators have to youth and the 4-H program.

Despite this initial herculean effort, 4-H must now pivot even further to focus on enhancing the assets and positive contexts of youths. 4-H faculty and staff are in need of advanced professional development to meet the emerging complex needs of youths affected by the virus. The new sciences of learning and development (Lerner, Gelhof, & Bowers, 2019) hold important implications for the content of these trainings. And, more than ever, 4-H educators need the support from Extension leaders for professional development, as well as authentic recognition for the enormity of the task at hand.

We believe that 4-H is uniquely positioned to promote positive youth development and mitigate the impacts of the pandemic in four ways:

1. Through addressing the crisis of isolation and the fundamental social need of young people to belong. Because social isolation in childhood can have long-term negative consequences (Keller, Perry, & Spencer, 2019), reducing isolation, limiting social media and its potential harmful effects as one's only form of social interaction (Swinton, 2020), and providing virtual and other noncontact ways to belong are key to preserving the social and emotional well-being of youths.
2. Through enhancing current programs and developing new programs to focus on identifying and developing youth sparks. Youth sparks are defined as the very thing that gives youths the intrinsic fuel for their own development, thus promoting youth agency and resiliency rather than defeat and hopelessness (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011).
3. By fostering nurturing developmental relationships with youths (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017). The importance of sustained and supportive relationships between youths and adults cannot be overstated

given the clear evidence that such relationships have in buffering the far-reaching and long-term effects of adversity, particularly trauma, on young people (Harris, 2018).

4. By championing and facilitating youth agency through authentic leadership and service opportunities. In doing so, we allow youth voices to be brought forward to illuminate the effects of the pandemic on them and their ideas for promoting youth well-being in the time of COVID-19, thus fostering agency, identity, and a hopeful purpose.

None of these strategies are new to 4-H; they are all cornerstones of the 4-H approach to working with the nation's young people. The four positive youth development strategies outlined above are the critical research-based responses on which 4-H can build intentional programs for youths as we move from reaction to recovery and rebuilding. In enacting these responses, 4-H will stay true to its mission of youth development and ensure that young people not only survive but thrive in this time like no other.

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