

# Ohio State University Fact Sheet

## State 4-H Office

2120 Fyffe Rd., Columbus, OH 43210-1084

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## Involving Teens as Leaders

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**Kathryn J. Cox**

Extension Specialist, Youth Development

**Ken Culp, III, Ph.D.**

Extension Specialist, Volunteerism

### Why Work with Teens?

Youth development is the "reason for being" of the 4-H Youth Development. Both the 4-H mission statement (To enable youth to reach their fullest potential as capable, competent, caring, and contributing citizens) and the 4-H Pledge (which highlights the development of heads, hearts, hands, and health) illustrate the fact that youth development is the central focus of 4-H leadership development.

Working with teens is a "hot" topic. As anyone can attest who has chaperoned a group of teenagers at a conference, advised a club or youth organization, worked with a teen board, facilitate group discussion, adults have varying degrees of success in working with teenagers. Some adults seem to have developed a greater ability when working with teens. These teens always have a good time, arrive early, leave late, get along with each other, pay attention, behave, have fun, encourage their friends to get involved, and express appreciation to the adult for their leadership and assistance.

There are, however, examples of adults who get the opposite reaction. (i.e. chaperones whose groups are disrespectful or misbehave during assemblies; camp directors whose counselors sneak out of the cabins at night to drink or go skinny-dipping; groups in the no teen commitment or involvement) At community centers, club meetings, and teen board sessions, they are the ones who can't get anyone to sign up, and the teens who do come drop out or bad mouth the adults and the experience to their friends.

So what is the difference between adults who are successful in working with teens and those who are not? What are the secrets for success for working effectively with teens and keeping them involved in 4-H programs and activities?

### What Do Positive Adult/Teen Working Relationships Look Like?

The ways adults and teens work together varies with the situation, the task, and their personalities. One of the "basics" for teens and adults to work effectively together is for everyone to understand, and agree to accept or take steps to change the type of relationship which they have. Most of these relationships fall somewhere on the continuum from Adult Control to Teen Control.

## **Adult control**

Adults retain power in this type of relationship. Adults plan and structure the program and experiences in which teens will participate.

## **Consultation with teens**

In this type of relationship, teens are consulted in planning and implementation phases. However, adults retain veto power and expect teens to agree with and endorse their plans.

## **Partnership with teens**

Teens share a degree of real power and responsibility in a partnership relationship with adults. Adults and teens mutually agree on functions, and teens may sometimes bypass or override the adults.

## **Delegation of power to teens**

This type of relationship involves negotiation between adults and teens, and results in teens assuming absolute authority over some aspects of the program.

## **Teen control**

Teens are responsible for the planning and decision making phases in this relationship. Adults serve only in an advisory capacity, and may legalize programs, and mediate conflicts.

## **Which Relationship on the Continuum Is Best?**

There isn't a single best way to work with teens. Adults and teens need to assess their own situation, the purposes of the program, their own strengths and weaknesses, and the capabilities of the teens with whom they work. After making this assessment, decide at which point on the continuum the adult teen relationship should fall.

A major factor in teens' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the program and organizations in which they are involved is the degree of control maintained by adults. Teens tend to drop out when adults maintain total control and do everything. Teen commitment tends to grow in situations where adults share control and provide teens with real and important roles and responsibilities in keeping with the needs and interests of the teens who are involved. No matter which relationship is deemed most appropriate for the situation, it should be remembered that everyone should be set up for success. That is, all partners should agree on the type of relationship, and understand their level of commitment and responsibilities, in order for the relationship and its outcomes to be a success.

## **10 Tips for Success in Working with Teens**

Regardless of who has more control in the relationship, there are some strategies for adults to be effective in working with teens. Following are the "top 10" tips for success in working with teens.

1. Caring-Care about teens, be dedicated. Put care and dedication into action.
2. Respect-Respect teens, and expect their respect as well.
3. Enthusiasm-Be enthusiastic. Have a sense of humor.
4. Honesty-Let teens know what's expected. Communicate your high expectations to them.
5. Fairness-Be aware of what's really going on. Be fair and reasonable.
6. Guidance and Encouragement-Give teens guidance, training, and encouragement.
7. Meet Youth Needs-Learn teens' needs, wants, and expectations, and then provide it for them.
8. Responsibility-Involve teens and give them real responsibilities.
9. Confidence-Demonstrate a positive attitude of confidence and trust.

## 10. Openness-Be open to suggestions and constructive feedback.

Utilizing adult volunteers to provide youth with an ongoing, positive relationship is the cornerstone of the 4-H Youth Development. Youth will remain actively engaged if they feel responsibility for and ownership in their programs. Learning to involve youth in the program, and helping them to make sound, responsible, and healthy decisions will contribute to this feeling of ownership.

"If you treat individuals as if they are what they ought to be and can be, they will become what they ought to be and can be." -Goethe

"If you want teens to keep their feet on the ground, put some responsibility on their shoulders."  
-Abigail Van Buren

## References

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Keith L. Smith, Associate Vice President for Ag. Adm. and Director, OSU Extension.

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