

Designing a 4-H Residential Summer Camp Experience



4-H Residential Camping

Camping is one of the four primary 4-H delivery modes, and it is an important way for young people to be exposed to the essential elements necessary for positive youth development. 4-H camps have traditional educational camp activities; however, 4-H places heavy emphasis specifically on positive youth development and the development of life skills (Garst et al., 2011b). 4-H campers have the opportunity to better themselves through mastery, independence, generosity, and the feeling of belonging, while also making new friends, getting along with others, accepting differences in others, and developing additional intrapersonal skills (Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007; Shirilla, 2009).

When designing, implementing, and/or evaluating 4-H residential camping experiences, it is important to use the essential elements of positive youth development and the Targeting Life Skills model. With the essential elements of positive youth development, 4-H camps ensure that young people are in an environment that will help them thrive and succeed. The Targeting Life Skills model (Hendricks, 1996) can be used to make sure that campers are developing skills that will help them to embody important behaviors, as well as become productive adults.

Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development

Eccles and Gootman (2002) identified eight essential elements that contribute to the positive development of young people:

1. A positive relationship with a caring adult
2. An inclusive environment
3. A physically safe environment
4. Opportunity for mastery
5. Engagement in learning
6. Opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future
7. Opportunity for self-determination
8. Opportunity to value and practice service to others

The eight elements have been further synthesized by 4-H to fit into four core concepts: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Garst et al., 2011b; Kress, 2004; Martz et al., 2009; Meyer & Jones, 2015). A visual representation of how the essential elements fit into the four core 4-H concepts is shown in **Figure 1**.

<p>Belonging</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A positive relationship with a caring adult <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Caring adults can serve as advisers, guides, and/or mentors b. Help 4-H'ers to establish boundaries c. Supporter, friend, advocate 2. An inclusive environment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Creates a sense of belonging and encourages support from members b. Healthy groups promote the success of all members c. Take pride in collective efforts 3. A safe emotional and physical environment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Young people should not fear harm while participating in 4-H 	<p>Mastery</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Opportunity for mastery <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Building knowledge, skills, and attitudes b. Demonstrate use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes 5. Engagement in learning <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Mindful of subject area b. Builds relationships and connections in order to gain a deeper understanding c. Self-reflection d. Self-motivation
<p>Independence</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Have hope and optimism to shape life choices 7. Opportunity for self-determination <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Develop a sense of influence over one's own life 	<p>Generosity</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Opportunity to value and practice service to others <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Service to others

Figure 1. Kress, C. Essential elements of 4-H youth development. Retrieved from <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/4hwildlifestewards/pdfs/Essentialelements.pdf>

Research indicates that campers experience many opportunities for positive youth development. By using the positive youth development framework, 4-H has established a means of creating effective programs that can be evaluated and improved upon (Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011a). By incorporating these essential elements of positive youth development in experiential learning situations, 4-H summer camps provide young people with the opportunity to develop important life skills.

Life Skills

The Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1996) helps youth development professionals move young people toward their fullest potential. The model was created in 1996 to help guide planning, implementation, and evaluation of 4-H programs (Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007). The model contains 35 life skills that can be used as a way to improve the experiences of participants by focusing on achieving specific, measurable goals.

Most 4-H camps have adopted the Targeting Life Skills Model and use it to structure their programs (Garst et al., 2011b). The Targeting Life Skills Model exposes young people to various skills. The life skills model has further been synthesized to fit into the 4-H clover, which represents the four Hs: Head, Heart, Hands, and Health (Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, n.d., para. 3). **Figure 2** shows how the 35 life skills fit into the four Hs.

You can incorporate the essential elements of positive youth development and the acquisition of life skills into a residential summer camp experience through the facilities, staff, activities, and camp culture.

Facilities

In order to create a positive and safe summer camp experience for participants, it is important to consider the facilities you will be using. A physically safe environment is the best essential element to incorporate when considering the facilities. As indicated in **Figure 1**, young people should not fear harm when participating in 4-H programs, so it is imperative to make sure the location you have chosen for your camp experience is safe and properly equipped for your program to take place. Some components you must consider for your facilities are:

- Kitchen (how you will be serving the food, who will be serving the food, etc.)
- Health center/nurse’s station (this will be necessary for first aid purposes, as well as for participants who take daily medication)
- Activity areas (crafts, archery, horses, swimming, canoeing, nature-related activities, guest speakers—4-H camps typically have specific “tracks” the participants can choose to participate in)
- Dorms/cabins (consider your group size, number of beds, number of restrooms/showers, air conditioning, etc.)

<p>Head</p> <p>Thinking: using one’s mind to form ideas and make decisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning to learn • Decision-making • Problem-solving • Critical thinking • Service learning <p>Managing: using resources to accomplish a purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal-setting • Planning/organizing • Wise use of records • Keeping records • Resiliency 	<p>Heart</p> <p>Relating: establishing a mutual or reciprocal connection between two people that is wholesome and meaningful to both</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Cooperation • Social skills • Conflict resolution • Accepting differences <p>Caring: showing understanding, kindness, concern, and affection for others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern for others • Empathy • Sharing • Nurturing relationships
<p>Hands</p> <p>Giving: providing, supplying, or causing to happen (social responsibility)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community service/volunteering • Leadership • Responsibility • Contribution to group <p>Working: accomplishing something or earning pay to support oneself through physical or mental effort</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketable/useful skills • Teamwork • Self-motivation 	<p>Health</p> <p>Living: acting or behaving; the manner or style of daily life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy lifestyle choices • Stress management • Disease prevention • Personal safety <p>Being: living one’s life; pursuing one’s basic nature; involved in personal development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-esteem • Self-responsibility • Character • Managing feelings • Self-discipline

Figure 2. Norman, M., & Jordan, J. (2006). Targeting life skills in 4-H (Extension Publication 4HS FS101.9). Retrieved from University of Florida, the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences website: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/4h24>

Group living situations provide unique learning experiences for participants. This particular component of the experience can be associated with the life skill of living, which involves actions and behaviors and how people live their daily lives. Group living further achieves this element by exposing young people to healthy lifestyle choices, stress management, disease prevention, and personal safety.

Staff

The staff you choose to work with the young people is critical. It is important to choose age-appropriate and qualified individuals to supervise the participants. Particularly when working with young people, a background check is often required for staff. Even if not required, it is highly encouraged. Staff can include paid employees or volunteers, and the ages of your staff will depend on the ages of the participants. Using program staff members, teenage volunteer camp counselors, and adult volunteers will help you achieve the essential element of creating a positive relationship with a caring adult. The staff you employ for your program will serve as advisers, guides, mentors, friends, and advocates for the young people you are working with.

Camp counselors are volunteers who are responsible for a specific group of young participants. These individuals will be with the campers during the entirety of their stay. Camp counselors will be with campers at meals, will be active participants in all activities, and will stay with campers in the same cabin or living quarters. Camp counselors will volunteer 1 week at a time for as many weeks as the program director will allow. Camp counselors generally need to work in groups of three to five counselors, depending on the number of campers you have and how many living facilities you have. An appropriate ratio to follow for teenage camp counselors is one camp counselor to every five campers (University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension, 2014).

Program staff are college-aged students who will work throughout the entire summer and will be paid for their time. The program staff will lead the various daily activities, as well as be responsible for any night activities or specialty activities. It will be appropriate to assign two or three paid staff members per activity. Further, program staff will help to uphold the traditions and rituals that are unique to your particular camp.

If you are working with young people ages 8–13, it is appropriate to use high school students (14–18) as camp counselors, but it is wise to use adults 19 years of age and older for program staff. Conversely, if you are working with campers ages 14–18, it is appropriate to use camp counselors and program staff who are 21 years and older. Additionally, thorough and appropriate training is necessary for all staff members (paid and unpaid).

Serving as camp counselors gives young people an opportunity to value and practice service to others, another important essential element. They also get to practice and develop two important life skills: giving and working. By volunteering, counselors get to practice leadership and responsibility while actively contributing to the camp. By working, counselors gain experience in teamwork and self-motivation in order to be successful in their roles.

Activities

The mission and purpose of your residential summer camp determine what activities you will provide for your campers. However, your activities should be centered around the essential elements of engagement in learning and opportunity for mastery. Through engagement in learning, participants will gain knowledge and interest in various subject areas, make connections, and participate in self-reflection. Furthermore, through an opportunity for mastery, campers will build knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competency.

The life skills of thinking and managing can be incorporated into the activities you provide. Activities develop thinking by providing campers with opportunities for decision-making, problem-solving, and critical thinking. The activities should also develop managing, which includes goal-setting, planning, and record-keeping. Through properly planned activities with specific and measurable objectives, 4-H campers should be able to develop and master a variety of skills.

Activities that can be incorporated into a residential camping experience are:

- arts and crafts
- archery
- low and high ropes courses
- hiking
- swimming
- canoeing
- fishing
- horseback riding

Further, 4-H camps typically create “tracks” that young people can choose to participate in during their stay. These tracks include, but are not limited to:

- photography
- theatre arts
- environmental science
- sewing
- STEM
- wildlife
- food and fitness
- livestock

Camp Culture

The type of atmosphere or “culture” you create within your summer camp experience is essential to the success of your program. When campers participate in the program, they should feel accepted and like they belong. They should have an opportunity to create meaningful relationships with a variety of people. Further, it is important that 4-H’ers learn something through this experience, whether it be about a specific subject matter or about themselves.

Two important essential elements of positive youth development that should be incorporated into your program are the opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future and the opportunity for self-determination. Through participation in your residential summer program, campers should be able to think about what they have learned and apply it to real-life situations. Even if they cannot directly see how to apply it at first, your goal should be to help participants use the skills acquired at camp in their future endeavors. The program should provide young people with a sense of resiliency and purpose to make positive improvements in their own lives, as well as within the lives of others.

The culture your program creates can, and should, help young people to develop the life skills of relating, caring, and being. One of the most beneficial parts of a residential summer camp is the opportunity for participants to develop social skills and make friends.

Campers will probably come to your program from a variety of places. This will give participants the chance to learn to accept differences in others. Through these relationships, young people develop skills in communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, empathy, and sharing.

Finally, campers should have the opportunity to “reinvent” themselves through your program, or become the best versions of themselves. Participants will develop self-esteem, responsibility, and character. Overall, your residential summer camp should be a positive experience for all who attend and should serve as a place where young people feel free to be themselves while making friends in a safe, inclusive, and nonjudgmental environment.

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