

4-H Gets Scientific

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Imagine this: Studies have shown that adults who work in science and engineering related fields were most likely kids who had an interest in science. Not necessarily an aptitude for science, but simply an *interest* in the scientific explanation of how things work. Because of this Charlie Hutchinson, from the Center for Science Education at EDC (Education Development Centers) in Newton MA, has made it his mission to get kids interested in science. EDC's recent focus on after-school programming has drawn 4-H closer to the core of this issue.

In January, 4-H educators from four NH counties participated in a three day hands-on science training. Charlie presented us with material that we would in turn present to after-school staff, 4-H leaders, and volunteers, who would in turn do the projects with kids.

Kids are most interested in what they are able to figure out themselves, with what they are able to “play” around with; it turns out adults aren't all that different. By letting us play around with the materials, we are better prepared to explain, facilitate and engage the kids in the projects. Incorporate a few brief group discussions about the materials you are playing around with— what is working and what isn't—and you have an hour-long project that is fun, educational, and mimics exactly the age-old 4-H philosophy of “Do, Reflect, Apply.”

“Paper Bridges” is just one of the many projects this science curriculum offers. Participants start out with 4 sheets of recycled office paper, 12 inches of masking tape, and 6 text books to use as riverbanks. They are instructed to build a self supporting bridge that can span the 8 ½ inch river. If you've never built a bridge, or really thought about how a bridge works, you might lay one piece of paper across the make-believe banks and watch it sag dejectedly into the icy waters of your make-believe river. You might think there is no way that a bridge made from paper will ever support any weight at all. You might, in desperation, look at the group next to you and see them rolling their papers into thin tubes, at which point you might see a realm of possibilities open up. And so begins the experiments, the spying, and the shared reflections that make this program so lively, fun, and educational.

Currently 4-H is working with four after-school sites and several 4-H clubs to get these projects into the hot hands of today's youth, tomorrow's scientists. This is the trial stage of a three year program. If you are interested in volunteering or finding out more about this and other 4-H programs, please call the UNH Cooperative Extension office at (603) 787-6944 or visit our webpage at <http://extension.unh.edu/Counties/Grafton/Grafton.htm>.