

Selecting programs for your kids: Is it POSITIVE youth development?

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As I write this, it is the end of July and thoughts of long days at the beach, summer ball games, family gatherings and all of the other summer fun activities run through my head. It's the time of year to kick back and relax...and to plan what you and your children will be doing for activities throughout the school year.

It is important how you as a family choose activities to fit your family's lifestyle and the kinds of things you want your children to learn and value as they mature to caring, compassionate adults. Being a 4-H alumni and the current 4-H Educator, I like to think 4-H is one of the activities families choose to get involved with for their "outside of school" activity. Whatever activity is chosen, think about the elements of positive youth development and how they apply to your choice.

America's Promise Founding Chairman, General Colin L. Powell, stated:

"We need to make sure that no boy or girl in America is growing up without having in his or her life the presence of a responsible, caring adult. Where else does a child learn how to behave? Where else does a child learn the experiences of the past, the totems and traditions of the past? Where else does a child look for the proper examples except from responsible, caring, loving adults in his or her life?"

In the world of 4-H, we call it positive youth development. The movement has eight critical elements.

- A positive relationship with a caring adult.
- A physically and emotionally safe environment.
- An opportunity for mastery/competence.
- A welcoming/inclusive environment.
- An opportunity for self-determination.
- An opportunity to value and practice service to others.
- An opportunity to see one's-self as an active participant in the future.
- An appropriately structured environment.

The underlying premise for one of the critical elements in positive youth development – that of a positive relationship with a caring adult - is that youth will develop caring and trusting relationships. Youth and adults should learn together and respect one another. A caring adult, whether he/she is called supporter, friend, or advocate, acts as an advisor, guide or mentor. The adult sets boundaries and expectations for young people.

Does the youth organization you choose have caring adults that meet with youth on a regular basis?
Does it have all of the critical elements of a positive youth development setting?

In 4-H, we recommend our leaders ask themselves the following questions:

- Do youth participate equally with adults in planning, implementing and evaluating the club program?
- Is time provided for both youth and adults to meet and learn about each other?
- Are opportunities provided and encouragement given for youth to continue friendships with other youth and adults?
- Are members able to interact with adults to learn and have fun together?

- Does the organization encourage youth and adults to learn and participate as teams - rotating participation in the teams at each meeting? Adults should try to listen to and concentrate on what youth are saying rather than promoting their own ideas and downplaying others' suggestions.
- Are adults encouraged to interact with youth? – such as mingling with youth at club meetings and functions rather than segregating themselves at the back of the room. Be sure you have adequate “adult presence” at events and activities.
- Are activities created to celebrate and have fun together in addition to just meeting for the organization's business?

The Search Institute in its “assets research” suggests that each young person receive support from three or more non-parent adults. Communities need to provide young people with sustained adult relationships through which they experience support, care, and guidance. Caring and connectedness within and beyond the family are found to be powerful factors in protecting young people from negative behaviors and in encouraging good social skills, responsible values, and positive identity. Every child needs love, affirmation, and acceptance. Parents, extended family members, neighbors, teachers, community leaders, 4-H alums and adults who spend time with youth can all provide positive, caring relationships and can help to ensure that all children have at least three caring adults in their lives.

Youth can only benefit from contact with caring adults if adults volunteer. My challenge to parents and other caring adults: Become trained or certified for the organization you and your family choose. Follow through with regular, meaningful activities planned in conjunction with youth members as a partnership. Think about how you can volunteer to help the organization. Take advantage of training opportunities from the organization your family chooses to join.

Caring adults in partnerships with youth are the foundations of a good youth organization. Take time and think about what your family's goals and interests are, match your tastes with an organization providing positive youth development and have some fun during the year.

Parts of this article were adapted with permission from University of Illinois Extension, 4-H Program. For more information about 4-H in Grafton County New Hampshire, visit our website at: <http://extension.unh.edu/Counties/Grafton/Grafton.htm> or contact our office at 603-787-6944 or e-mail Kathleen.jablonski@unh.edu.

Look for next week's column from Arianne Fosdick, Volunteer Management Program Assistant.

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