

**The Importance of Relationships with Caring Adults (Part 2):
Adults' Role in Helping Teens Develop Initiative Skills**

Ohio Buckeye Clovergraham, May 2005

By

Janel Digby, Graduate Research Associate

Theresa M. Ferrari, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development

As part of their 4-H experience, teens help to plan a variety of programs such as 4-H club fundraisers or camp activities and sessions. Adults have two objectives that often compete with each other when they are helping teens to plan programs: They want the teens to take ownership and to develop planning and organizing skills, but they don't want the program to fail. Often, such as in the case of a camp program, it is important that the program is well implemented, as the well-being of others, in this case the campers, is at stake. We know that when teens have meaningful roles and responsibilities, such as leading committees, supervising younger children, and teaching workshops, that they develop a high level of personal and interpersonal skills (McNeely, 2004). On the other hand, teens are still learning how to accept responsibility and work with others. The extent to which they are able to manage all these processes might get in the way of achieving successful program outcomes. How do adult leaders find the right balance when working with teens?

In this article, we focus on ways adults to help teens develop initiative. A qualitative research study that examined how adults and youth interacted as they carried out a group planning process provides the basis for this article; interestingly, the program being planned was a day camp (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005). *Initiative* is defined as "the capacity to direct cumulative effort over time toward achievement of a long-term goal" (Larson et al., 2005, p.160). Competencies related to initiative include learning to set realistic goals, exert effort, manage time, and take responsibility. Other aspects of initiative are related to working with others include learning communication skills, giving and taking feedback, and taking responsibility within a group. Teen initiative skills are important because more jobs today require individuals to think and act with a plan, either individually or collaboratively, as opposed to rote and manual labor. However, teens do not always have experiences that develop initiative skills, nor do they necessarily understand the importance of these skills in the world of work. Thus, adults have an important role in the process of developing initiative.

Young children are cognitively egocentric, that is, they assume that others experience the world in the same way they do. As children enter into adolescence, they begin to acquire the capacity to understand others thoughts and feelings, but they do not always use that ability. Teens are capable of initiative when assisted by others, including adults and their peers. The good news is that initiative is thought to develop best under the conditions that are found in youth organizations. That is, because participation in these organizations and their associated activities is voluntary and structured, youth experience intrinsic motivation and focused attention; in addition, the structure of these organizations provides for goal-directed activities (e.g., 4-H projects, planning and participating in a camp program) to continue over a span of time (Larson, 2000). Furthermore, while important in its own right, initiative is also thought to be connected to other components of positive development, such as creativity, leadership, altruism, and civic engagement.

Adults who work with youth in the context of youth organizations can intervene in ways that are effective in maintaining youth ownership while keeping their work on track. The following is a summary of effective practices for helping adults achieve both objectives, the development of teen initiative as well as having a successful program when working with teens (Larson et al., 2005; Walker & Larson, 2004).

- *Follow youths' lead* – Adults should follow the direction and goals set by teens. The adult leader should ask teens for permission before giving help. This technique builds youth ownership. Giving youth ownership may set the group up for failure. However, adults should view failure as a learning experience for youth and should not step in immediately in every circumstance.
- *Ask guiding questions*. Adult leaders should intentionally ask youth questions that help clarify suggestions or filter out ideas. Questioning also helps youth evaluate whether a proposed idea would be appropriate, fun, or interesting. Moreover, questioning is a non-threatening technique that can provoke youth to think more deeply and strategically while keeping ownership.
- *Provide intermediate structures*. When youth are having difficulty structuring their work, adult leaders need to intervene to some extent. Helping students break their work into manageable steps to reach realistic goals and deadlines is an example of intervening.
- *Monitor to keep youth on track*. Methods of monitoring include observing and asking questions, and supporting through behind-the-scenes tasks. Checking up on the progress of student work is another way of monitoring youth. Intervening in more direct ways may be required to keep youth on track. Monitoring requires careful intervention to ensure that adults support rather than undercut youth ownership.

It is important to keep in mind that youth need challenges. Adults can help youth by encouraging them to try out new roles that will allow them to grow. However, challenges beyond one's skill can create anxiety and teens may feel betrayed if adults let them fail in a situation that is beyond their abilities. Furthermore, when adults take over a project that is run by youth, youth may feel embarrassed, angry, or disempowered. Evidence suggests that given the right amount and type of support, teens can carry out outstanding projects. We have many examples of such projects in our work with 4-H youth.

References

- Larson, R. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 170-183.
- Larson, R., Hansen, D., & Walker, K. (2005). Everybody's gotta give: Development of initiative and teamwork within a youth program. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs* (pp. 159-183). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- McNeely, N. N. (2004). *The Ohio 4-H camp counseling experience: Relationship of participation to personal, interpersonal, and negative experiences*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Walker, K., & Larson, R. (2004). Life on the ground: Balancing youth ownership with adult input. *The Evaluation Exchange*, X(1), 8. Available at Harvard Family Research Project website: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/eval/issue25/spring2004.pdf>