

An Evaluation of the Presence of 4-H Critical Elements in Adventure Central Programming



Theresa M. Ferrari, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development
Graham Cochran, Extension Agent, 4-H Youth Development, Adventure Central
Nate Arnett, Extension Agent, 4-H Youth Development, Adventure Central
Niki Nestor McNeely, District 4-H Specialist
Jessica E. Paisley, 4-H Program Assistant, Muskingum County
Ohio State University Extension
Cassie L. Turner, Boys Scouts of America, Findlay, OH



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Program Description

Adventure Central at Wesleyan MetroPark is a brand new youth education center that targets urban youth in Dayton, Ohio.

Adventure Central brings the 4-H experience into an urban environment for youth in kindergarten through age 19 during out of school hours. This is possible through a partnership between The Ohio State University Extension, 4-H Youth Development and Five Rivers MetroParks. Through the involvement of AmeriCorps members, The Partnership for Youth, Inc. and many community volunteers, **Adventure Central** provides a safe after-school environment with a wide range of activities.

Adventure Central serves as a hub for out-of-school time programming for school-age youth with after-school programs, clubs, and camps. Youth spend time with volunteers reading, getting help with homework, working on hands-on projects, and most important, forming positive relationships with a caring adult.

After-school programming is available during the school year Monday through Thursday from 2:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. During this time youth are provided with open computer lab time, a snack (the equivalent of a healthy dinner), academic advancement and homework assistance, and a program or activity that focuses on such topics as technology, gardening, or health and nutrition.



ADVENTURE CENTRAL'S

MISSION

To promote positive youth development education and leadership skills using an environmental foundation in a welcoming, safe, fun, active setting that utilizes volunteers and community resources with adult and youth interaction.

For each session, youth participants are divided into five groups based on age, grade level, and maturity level. A group leader, an assistant group leader, and other staff or volunteers supervise each group. The center also offers six-week, topic-specific (i.e., nature, technology, etc.) clubs that meet one day a week for one hour following the after-school programming. During the summer, the center offers two sessions of themed day camps, Monday through Thursday from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

October 2002 marks two years of operation for **Adventure Central**. The community reaction has been extremely positive so far. Volunteers make a tremendous impact - last year 51 volunteers contributed over 3,700 hours to the 4-H program at **Adventure Central**. Over 180 youth participated in after-school or day camp programming during the current school year.

ADVENTURE CENTRAL'S

GOALS

Provide Youth Development with an emphasis on environmental education, life skills, job readiness skills, character education, leadership skills, decision making, and discipline.

Provide Positive, Sustained Adult and Youth Interaction on an on-going basis through adult volunteers and others in the community.

Offer a Variety of Structured Events and Programs that are fun and utilize the environment, science, out-of-doors, and hands-on activities in a safe, caring setting.

Assume Young People Have a Say in Their Future and the program direction at Adventure Central.

Encourage Opportunities to Give Back to the community through service.

Model for Positive Youth Development in Ohio 4-H

Eight elements key to positive youth development were identified through a national impact assessment (National 4-H Impact Study, 2001). All 4-H programs, including those in after-school settings, are based on these principles of positive youth development.

- ✓ Positive relationships with caring adults
- ✓ Safe environment
- ✓ Welcoming environment
- ✓ Competence and mastery
- ✓ Engagement in learning
- ✓ Value and practice service
- ✓ Self-determination
- ✓ Vision of oneself in the future

Program Evaluation

As 4-H continues to expand after-school programs, documenting outcomes is increasingly important. The importance of the key elements to Ohio 4-H Youth Development programming and their consistency with the goals of **Adventure Central** guided a comprehensive program evaluation. Evaluation of the program was conducted during the program year 2001-2002.

The evaluation was guided by two questions:

1. To what extent do Adventure Central participants experience the eight key elements?
2. How do youths' experiences at Adventure Central compare with their experiences at home, school, and in their neighborhoods?



Methodology

A survey was developed by drawing items from existing scales to measure the eight key elements. In addition, qualitative methods were used to examine the processes involved in creating positive environments for youth. To obtain this insight, observations of adult-youth interactions (Paisley, 2002) and interviews and focus groups (Turner, 2002) were conducted. Data were analyzed using SPSS and appropriate qualitative techniques.

The sample for this study consisted of 48 (22 male, 26 female) youth for whom parental permission had been obtained. The respondents ranged in age from 4 to 13 ($M = 8.75$, $SD = 2.45$) and were 88% African American and 12% mixed race. The majority (52%) were from single-parent homes.

Findings

The results are organized by each key element.

Adult Relationships

Six survey items were used to measure adult relationships ($\alpha = .76$). Possible scores ranged from 0-3.

Extent of Positive Adult Relationships	
Items	Mean Score
Trust adults at Adventure Central (AC).	2.79
Adults at AC encourage me.	2.77
Adults at AC talk with me about the future.	2.74
Adults at AC tell me "good job."	2.72
Adults at AC care about me.	2.66
Can tell adults at AC about my problems.	2.63
Scale Mean	2.71

Attendance was a contributing factor to positive relationships. Participants with higher attendance reported more positive relationships with adults, $r = .48, p < .01$.

Paired t -tests indicated significant differences between high and moderate attendees on three of the six adult relationship items: trust, tell me "good job," and tell my problems.

Observations of adult-youth interactions were overwhelmingly positive (97%). These observations indicated that the adults provided support that was both emotional (caring and responsive) and instrumental (direction and guidance). Half of the observations were in four major categories.

The following behaviors were observed most frequently:

- » talking to a child using a positive tone
- » giving directions to a youth
- » listening to a child
- » using a child's name when talking with him/her

Furthermore, interviews with adolescent participants indicated that their relationships with the adults contributed to their continued participation in the

program. They recognized the assistance that the adults provided with homework "makes it understandable."

Relationships with adults at Adventure Central were compared to those with adults in the home, with teachers, and with neighborhood adults. Using paired t -tests, relationships with Adventure Central adults were found to be significantly more positive than relationships with teachers ($t = -2.856$) or neighborhood adults ($t = -3.827$).

Safe Environment

Participants indicated that they felt safe at Adventure Central. Two-thirds indicated that they felt safer at Adventure Central than their neighborhood. In particular, adolescents recognize the importance of a safe environment, as evidenced by this comment: "It keeps us away from the streets. So you won't get caught up in anything." If they weren't at Adventure Central, they may be watching TV, hanging out, and getting into trouble.

Welcoming Environment

A five-item measure of belonging was used to determine a welcoming environment ($\alpha = .76$). Possible scores ranged from 0-3.

Extent of Belonging	
Items	Mean Score
I feel comfortable at AC.	3.00
I feel I am a part of AC.	2.71
I am committed to AC.	2.71
I am accepted at AC.	2.57
I am supported at AC.	2.42
Scale Mean	2.68

Competence and Mastery

Nearly all of the participants (95%) reported that the program's activities helped them with their learning. Youth also indicated that they were recognized for learning and achieving. One youth specifically credited *homework assistance from caring adults* as the main reason for coming back every day. There was an overall sense that the homework assistance provided was very beneficial.

Engagement in Learning

All youth indicated that they had the opportunity to try new things at Adventure Central.

There were several activities that adolescents indicated they found particularly engaging. These were activities in which they felt they were treated with importance. For example, being a teen assistant in the summer program was described as “*the beginning of having my first job in my life.*” Another youth indicated that participating on the Youth Board made her feel “*like I’m an important businesswoman.*”

Sense of Self-Determination

The majority of youth indicated that they have a sense of self-determination:

83% believe they are capable of taking a leadership role.

85% believe they can deal with problems that might come up in the future.

90% have set goals to achieve.

Sense of Future

Adolescents, in particular, were able to make connections with their participation and their future.

“Since I have been coming here, my grades have been coming up. . . . I should . . . keep coming so I can succeed and try to get a scholarship to college.”

Conclusions

Through comprehensive program evaluation, including surveys, interviews, and a focus group, it was found that Adventure Central is successful in providing its youth participants with a safe and supportive environment that fosters learning and healthy lifestyles. This is captured in one participant’s comment: “[Adventure Central is] *a nice environment to be in. I feel comfortable here. I like the people.*” Many of the program’s participants cited tutoring and academic advancement as a key reason for attending. Furthermore, a vast majority of participants reported that the program’s activities help them with their learning.

It is believed that the inclusion of certain elements leads to positive outcomes for youth. Given these findings, we can conclude that the program appears to be working as intended. Continued program development will build on these findings.

References

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For more information, contact:

Adventure Central Program

Graham Cochran, cochran.99@osu.edu

Extension Agent, 4-H Youth Development

Nate Arnett, arnett.67@osu.edu

Extension Agent, 4-H Youth Development
Adventure Central

2222 N. James H. McGhee Blvd., Dayton, OH 45427
(937) 268-1037

Niki Nestor McNeely,
mcneely.1@osu.edu

District 4-H Specialist, Southwest
303 Corporate Center Dr., Suite 208
Vandalia, OH 45377
(937) 454-5002

Adventure Central Evaluation

Theresa M. Ferrari, Ph.D.

Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development
ferrari.8@osu.edu

2120 Fyffe Rd., Rm. 25, Columbus, OH 43210
(614) 292-4444



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