

## Teen Leadership and Development Fact Sheets: **Working Effectively With Teen Volunteers**

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Teen volunteers can be an essential part of your 4-H youth development program. Teens have volumes of excitement and energy on which they can capitalize. Furthermore, they can bring fresh ideas to the table and serve as one of the best resources for recruiting new members of many ages.

In order to effectively work with teen volunteers, one must understand their motivations, needs, and potential contributions. By evaluating and addressing the needs of teens, we can accomplish our goal of positive youth development (Cox and Culp 1999).

Throughout the teenage years, great changes occur in the physical, mental, emotional, and social maturity of youth. All of these maturity changes should influence programming targeted toward teens. Research categorizes teens into three categories: young, middle, and older. Because teens develop and mature their cognitive, social/emotional, and interpersonal skills at different rates, the ages listed below are approximate (Spano 2004). The following tips suggest a few ways we can address the mental, emotional, and social needs of young, middle, and older teens.

### **Young Teens (ages 12 to 14)**

Young teens are beginning to develop abstract thinking abilities. With this change comes an increased sense of justice and fairness. Similarly, they begin to feel a growing sense of responsibility and tend to seek out opportunities where they can showcase responsible



actions. We can encourage community service projects because this addresses young teens' growing desires for social responsibility and community involvement.

### **Plan for Small Group Work**

Small group work encourages young teens to share ideas more openly because the setting is less intimidating than a large group situation. Within these small groups — and really in all situations — allow for and support the mixing of boys and girls. However, don't force the issue if they appear to be more comfortable in same-gender groups.

### **Provide Training**

Social skill development is another important need that should be addressed. While small group and mixed-gender situations help promote these skills, we can also provide specific training on social skills (working with new people and those who share different views, backgrounds, and opinions) and communication techniques (verbal, nonverbal, and written).

### **Account for Differences**

Since physical development can have a major impact on comfort and ability level with activities, account for these differences when planning group activities. Along the same lines, make all competitions as fair as possible. Young teens will be easily upset by situations they consider unfair.

## Be Receptive and Empathetic

Spending time with adults who accept them and value their ideas is important for young teens and can have a lasting, positive effect on their development. This helps teens feel more stable and be more receptive to the adults' input later on. Everyone needs empathy; it is one of the greatest gifts we can give each other. Empathy bridges the gaps between people and helps them know they are not alone.

## Middle Teens (ages 15 to 17)

Programming designed for middle teens should allow for the development of their abilities and talents. Now that these teens have begun to discover their strengths, we need to provide opportunities for further development through trainings and competitions.



## Encourage Exploration

Though parents and schools support career exploration, we can provide opportunities on a much broader scale than middle teens receive in their schools or homes. Bring in community members with interesting but uncommon jobs to exhibit the diversity found in your community. It is also essential to provide opportunities for youth to develop specific new skills in a variety of fields.

## Embrace the Role of Guide

At this stage, your role should change from director to guide. As you begin this transition, remember that consistency is important. Teens can be turned off by

people who change drastically from day to day or even situation to situation. Middle teens need more room to explore their own independence and identity through decision-making and planning, so allow them to become even more involved in the selection and management of 4-H activities. There can be many great opportunities for youth to practice organizational and communication skills while planning any number of typical 4-H events.

## Older Teens (ages 18 to 19)

Older teens, for the most part, are physically and mentally mature. Though they may still have some learning to do, they are generally capable of acting like adults and will expect to be treated as such. One of the fastest ways to lose older teen members is to treat them like you would children or young teens. Whenever you are dealing with older teens, remember that they are preparing for a major transition and need help with planning and goal setting. Another factor to consider is that part-time jobs and advanced schooling will begin to replace clubs and other social activities.

## Let Teens Have Some of the Control

The key to preparing a good program for older teens is to remember that they will want some control. Instead of prescribing how something should be done, let them do it their own way. Serve as a positive role model and resource rather than a rigid authority figure. Some examples of control that can be given to teens include developing a meeting agenda, contacting places for community service activities, gathering supplies for an event, etc. Giving them some control will increase their buy-in, making them more likely to participate in the program as well as advertise it to their peers.



## Be Flexible

Allow older teens to serve in nontraditional roles within the organization. Due to their many other commitments, they may not have the patience or time for traditional meetings and activities, but they may be a wonderful resource for specific events.

## Key Life Skills for Teens

Despite the major differences between the three categories of teens, there are six key life skills that need to be developed during the teen years for positive youth development (fig. 1).

We can meet these six essential needs by encouraging teens to take charge of their own clubs and major activities (Fox 2004). Focus on individuals and their specific needs and strengths. Then, find a role for them within your program and help them identify goals and skills to meet their needs. After you have worked together to identify goals, allow teens to develop skills and perform tasks with minimal interference. Provide support or resources when necessary, but remember to act as a guide rather than a director, especially with middle and older teens.

## References

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Figure 1. Six essential life skills to develop during the teen years.

Accomplishments include					
Increase and maintain knowledge of self and self-esteem.	Learn to be increasingly responsible and make complex decisions.	Set goals and develop strategies to reach those goals.	Become increasingly independent from parents/caregivers.	Develop strong relationship skills.	Increase interpersonal communication skills.