

Building Community Inclusion Program:

A Report of Promising Practices



Six 4-H programs in five states advocated for youth/adult partnerships to change the view of inclusion of youth with disabilities in community programs and life through the *Building Community Inclusion (BCI) Program*, administered by National 4-H Council with funding from the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation through their *Beyond Participation* project. The Beyond Participation project increases inclusion of young people with disabilities in community youth organizations. 4-H sites that conducted pilot projects in 2004-2005 were:

- Macon County 4-H Program, University of Illinois Extension
- 4-H Camp Howe, University of Massachusetts-Amherst Extension
- TRY-IT Include Everyone, North Carolina State University
- Texas 4-H Center, Texas A&M University
- 4-H CAPITAL, Travis County 4-H Program, Texas
- Hanover Habitat for Humanity Youth United, Virginia Tech Extension

The sites conducted youth/adult partnership training, included youth and adults with disabilities in youth/adult partnerships, ensured youth roles in governance and provided opportunities for youth and adults to work together on local governance groups. Governance groups and youth worked together to implement community awareness activities, develop strategies and implement action plans to create an environment of inclusion for youth of all abilities to take action in their communities.

Staff with the Family and Youth Institute at Colorado State University evaluated the process and achievements of BCI sites. The following challenges and promising practices were derived from their report.

Introduction

Because the term disability encompasses multiple conditions ranging from physical incapacity to psychological disorders, professionals working with disabled populations find themselves addressing not only environmental access requirements, but also ensuring they, their staff and volunteers are prepared to address emotional and social needs of their program participants. These needs should not scare youth development professionals and volunteers away from creating and maintaining inclusive youth and community programs. Full inclusion can be addressed through assessing and addressing individual accommodation and service needs.





Standardized “best practices” focused on inclusion strategies do not exist in the academic realm if one considers a “best practice” the formal compilation of observational research that longitudinally and systematically determines the best approach to a condition or situation that achieves the best outcome. This lack of research prohibits the creation of best practices based on BCI evaluation data. However, from common challenges and responses to meet those challenges, developing a set of promising practices was feasible. The promising practices presented here were gleaned from case studies and other evaluation tools that specifically required sites to discuss lessons learned over the course of the program.

Disability-serving organizations have created best practices that youth development professionals and volunteers also can use to create inclusion programs. The following are some organizational Web sites that have best practices or other resources to assist programs in becoming more inclusive:

www.includingallkids.org was built by Easter Seals as part of the *Beyond Participation* project sponsored by the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation. IncludingAllKids was created to assist youth organizations to actively engage young people of all abilities. The Web site focuses on four areas: why inclusion matters, frequently asked questions about inclusion, developing an inclusion program, and resources. The resources section lists numerous Web sites and downloadable inclusion materials.

www.inclusion.com has a section called Inclusion Press which includes person-centered resource materials (e.g., books, videos, DVDs, CD-roms and kits, planning tools, inclusion articles, inclusion newsletter) for training events, schools, community organizations, service agencies and families.

The Happenin’ Habitats project (**happeninhabitats.pwnet.org**) was built by the National Wildlife Federation as part of the *Beyond Participation* project sponsored by the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation. Teachers and students learn how to create an accessible schoolyard wildlife habitat site usable as an outdoor classroom. This universally-designed course includes activity adaptations for students with hearing, learning, motor and visual disabilities and site accessibility guidelines to create a habitat that can be enjoyed by all.

Challenges

Sites discovered a range of challenges as they implemented their inclusive youth/adult partnerships and community programs. However, all were able to adapt to and overcome these barriers to a greater or lesser degree. Common challenges were:

- establishing community collaborations,
- creating collective input,
- recruiting youth and adult leaders,
- accessing disability related or adapted curricula,
- training staff/volunteers, and
- funding sufficient for implementation.

Promising Practices

The valuable experiences of staff and volunteers at BCI sites are the basis for the following promising practices that focus on developing adaptable youth/adult partnerships and inclusive youth and community programming that addresses the physical, intellectual and social requirements of disabled individuals.

Initiate “Bottom-up” and “Top-down” Collaboration

Initiate buy-in from all individuals involved prior to implementing inclusive community collaborations, not just from external organizational leaders. Gaining approval and support from community leaders is not enough to ensure successful collaboration. You must involve from the start staff and volunteers within your program as well as individuals in the community you hope will be part of the collaboration.

Visit community organizations and take the time to meet with the individuals working in and volunteering for the organization. Fully describe requirements of program involvement and ensure that people can ask questions and address issues experienced during the collaboration period.

Involve Everyone When Developing Inclusive Practices

Acquiring the input of everyone involved when developing or adapting inclusive practices or programs is key. These groups include staff, volunteers and program participants and their families.

Be proactive in addressing the latent misconception that 4-H programming focuses solely on youth and that youth voices cannot or will not be heard by adults. Make the effort to find youth and adult leaders willing to be active in youth in governance activities within the municipal arena. Get youth involved in developing peer recruitment strategies and actively recruiting others.

Include parents in the intake process, so they can express the individual needs of their children, and follow up to discuss how their children can be best supported. Use an exit survey as appropriate to continually assess your program’s ability to adapt to the specific needs of your participants.

Invest the Time to Adapt Curricula to Needs

Ensuring that curricula used in training encompasses all disabilities to be encountered by program staff and volunteers is crucial to a program’s success. BCI sites reported creating different adaptations to training curricula based upon need because using a standardized curriculum often was not feasible. This adaptation also included time reserved to discuss disability issues not covered by a curriculum and developing strategies based upon their own experiences. All sites agreed that training on the adapted curricula produced an increase in awareness and understanding in their staff and volunteers and was the strongest component to gaining internal buy-in.



Invest the Time to Implement Adaptive Training Strategies

The importance of training staff and volunteers in inclusion, youth/adult partnerships and potential disabilities that might be encountered was cited as a key practice. Sites overcame staff and volunteer resistance to including youth with disabilities in programs through focused training on inclusion practices. After training, staff reported an increased understanding of the needs of disabled individuals and was more willing to include them in program leadership and activities.

Training also can motivate youth with and without disabilities to successfully collaborate with adult program partners. Once sites implemented the “Creating Youth/Adult Partnerships” curriculum as a standard initial training requirement, youth became far more comfortable and reported feeling more empowered within the program.



Have the Patience to Prove Your Program's Value

It can be a challenge to allocate limited resources across various programmatic and administration requirements when faced with maintaining implementation while investing in accommodations and additional training.

You can build sustainability into your program by cementing community collaborations and leveraging resources. By promoting commitment and an open mind, program staff can develop trust and support from external organizations. You can gain trust within the community by being willing to admit what does and does not work and initiate change where and when it is needed.

Do Not Fear Being Different

Moving past fearing disabilities and differences is critical. Do your best to create and maintain inclusion practices and programming even if/when these programs don't look like "traditional" 4-H. When adapting or designing a program to be inclusive, you cannot expect to find a standard set of principles to guide the process. Do not be afraid to develop unique designs to fit individual participant needs.



Conclusion

4-H/Extension professionals, volunteers and youth developed more inclusive programs and created and sustained partnerships between youth and adults through lessons learned. Training and adapting program activities helped professionals, volunteers and youth deal with issues and develop strategies to identify and address the needs of their clients and communities. Although barriers to inclusion differed with each site, the lessons learned provided universal solutions. Adaptation is the most significant solution used by sites. A program is only inclusive if youth and adults collaborate, adapt to a variety of needs, and address the physical requirements and social aspects of accessibility and understanding in order to educate others about inclusion.

National 4-H Council thanks the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation for its generous support of the Building Community Inclusion Program. The Foundation's mission is to help young people with disabilities maximize their potential and participation in society.

4-H is a community of young people across America learning leadership, citizenship and life skills. For more information on the Building Community Inclusion Program, contact Sally Miske at smiske@fourhcouncil.edu or 301-961-2904.



National 4-H Council works to advance the 4-H youth development movement, building a world in which youth and adults learn, grow and works together as catalysts for positive change. National 4-H Council partners with the Cooperative Extension System of the Land Grant Universities, the National 4-H Headquarters at USDA, communities, and other organizations to provide technical support and training, develop curricula, create model programs and promote positive youth development to fulfill its missions. National 4-H Council also manages the National 4-H Youth Conference Center, a full-service conference facility, and the National 4-H Supply Service, the authorized agent for items bearing the 4-H name and emblem. National 4-H Council is a nonprofit 501(c) (3) organization. National 4-H Council is committed to a policy that all persons shall have equal access to its programs, facilities and employment without regard to race, color, sex, religious creed, ancestry or national origin, age, veteran status, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, physical or mental disability. Mention or display of trademark, proprietary product or firm in text or figures does not constitute an endorsement by National 4-H Council and does not imply approval to the exclusion of suitable products or firms. The 4-H name and emblem are protected by 18 USC 707.