

4-H Professionals and Volunteers Tip Sheet

Strategies for Working with Youth Living in Poverty

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Understanding youth living in poverty

4-H Youth Development programs are designed to create spaces where youth feel welcome, have a sense of belonging, and their contributions matter, so they may reach their fullest potential¹. This is particularly important for youth living in poverty, as they are often made to feel marginalized or “less than” by others².

Poverty often creates social conditions that constrain youths' opportunities to develop and strengthen their assets. Poverty constraints may include:

- Food and home insecurity.
- Limited access to material resources.
- Fewer opportunities to connect youth interests with opportunities and achievements.
- Extra obligations about supporting their family's basic needs.
- Social exclusion/lack of belonging.

Your role in leading 4-H Youth

Development programs and activities

Strong relationships among peers and with caring adults can have an immediate positive effect on youth living in poverty³. You are trusted to create a safe and vibrant learning experience that maintains family confidentiality. All young people have unique passions and assets that if provided the opportunities and support, can build on these assets and thrive. Below is a list of actions to make the 4-H program inclusive for youth living in poverty:

Check Your Assumptions and Biases at the Door

We have the tendency to generalize and sort information into categories to make sense of the world. This can lead to inaccurate assumptions about people who are different from us—in this case, youth and families living in poverty.

- Understand your own implicit bias and acknowledge how it affects your values and assumptions.
- Get to know youth in your program, and work to understand their everyday life experiences.

- Allow youth to tell their story without judgment or assumptions.
- Build relationships of trust, safety, and mutual respect. Consider that the values you respect may be different for youth living in poverty.

Create an Inclusive Environment

Youth living in poverty experience heightened social exclusion and are more likely to feel discounted by society².

- Create a safe space for youth to be themselves. Ask youth what they need for this space to be safe.
- Prioritize building trust and relationships with youth.
- Engage youth in designing and leading program activities.
- Prioritize activities that help youth discover their value and passion.
- Acknowledge youth who are willing to share their experiences and demonstrate your appreciation for the value they contribute.
- Eliminate or be flexible with rules and structures that create barriers for participation.
- Suspend judgment on youths' behaviors.

Assess Transportation Accessibility

Youth living in poverty may lack access to safe and reliable transportation.

- Select an accessible meeting location
 - Navigable on foot or by bike.
 - Easy to access when using public transportation.
 - Meeting schedule aligns with public transportation schedules.
- Make a transportation plan with youth
 - Consider the public transportation resources in your area.
 - Check with your local Extension Office for specific university transportation policies.

Consider the Costs of Participation in 4-H

Resist making assumptions about family resources available for youth in your program. Participation in 4-H Youth Development programs sometimes have associated costs, which may be a participation barrier for some youth. Familiarize yourself with community resources that could offset the direct costs to families. As you consider activities for your program, keep in mind:

- Participation Fees / Purchases
 - Seek opportunities to provide free programs.
 - Ensure financial assistance options are available for all families.
 - Purchases by members should not be expected for participation (*e.g., apparel, snacks, project materials/tools*).
- Project Costs
 - Livestock projects can have large costs for purchase of animals, feed, and supplies. Create opportunities where youth can participate in these projects without owning an animal. Solicit funding from local agricultural businesses or farm bureau to gather scholarships for children to participate in a livestock project.
 - Assists members in exploring the costs of projects to help them decide what additional resources are needed to offer the project.
- Fundraising / Donations
 - Do not make it an expectation that all members participate in selling or donating for program activities.
 - Any funds raised should be used equitably for all members for participation costs. (*e.g., books, t-shirts, etc.*).

Programs are Youth-Centered and Adult Supported

4-H Youth Development programs rely heavily on project-based learning, as seen at events such as fairs and exhibitions. These projects may often require a significant investment of time and finances. Consider how youth can engage in project-based learning in low- or no-cost ways.

- Support youth in developing projects based on their interests and passions.
- Allow for adequate time to complete project work at meetings.
- Seek additional adult volunteers who can support youth in project-based learning.
- Help youth identify adults in their lives who can support their 4-H work.

Recruit and Engage New 4-H Members with Intention

Use various engagement methods regularly to ensure youth living in poverty have an equitable opportunity to join and participate in 4-H:

- Partner with community programs, non-profits, and schools/school programs that serve youth living in poverty well to promote program opportunities.
- Partner with public housing or apartment communities to promote the program, and/or offer it at these locations.
- Use a variety of communication channels. Resist using only one mode of communication (*e.g., newsletter*). Ask family participants the best method of communication.
- Communicate in a way everyone can understand. This may mean adapting the literacy level or asking a community partner to translate the information into a different language.

Evaluate Your 4-H Youth Development Program

Develop a plan to understand youths' experience with 4-H. Gather feedback throughout the 4-H year and include caregivers and youth.

- Engage in one-on-one conversations with youth and if possible, with their families. Find out where they are from, how they are doing, what they like/dislike, and ideas for ways to improve the program in the future.
- If a young person stops attending, find out why. It could be they had to find a job or have competing interests. Let the young person know the 4-H door is always open for them. Once you know why they left, you can address their reason for leaving so they may join again.
- Consider using formal evaluations to evaluate your 4-H program.

Sources

¹Arnold, M. E. (2018). From context to outcomes: A thriving model for 4-H youth development programs. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 6(1), 141-160.

²DeJaeghere, J. (2019). A capability pedagogy for excluded youth: Fostering recognition and imagining alternative futures. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 1–15

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³Jensen, E. (2016). *Poor students, rich teaching: Mindsets for change*. Solution Tree Press.