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Interdependence: Ninth and Newest Critical Element for 4-H Positive Youth Development

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Interdependence: Ninth and Newest Critical Element for 4-H Positive Youth Development

Abstract

For the past 15 years, a list of eight critical elements has provided a strong foundation for articulating the positive youth development focus of 4-H programs and efforts. Now it is time to revisit this list and update the critical elements for positive youth development. Interdependence is proposed as a ninth critical element that should be included. Research is cited for the importance of this element that was not included in the original list in 1998, and a call is made for a national think tank to update the critical elements.

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Background

More than 15 years ago, a group of researchers was called together and assembled in Tucson at the University of Arizona to begin a process that would have major impacts on the 4-H program both nationally and locally. "In December 1997, forty-five people from twenty-three different states met in Tucson, Arizona, to discuss and design a National Impact Assessment of the 4-H Youth Development Program" (National 4-H Impact Assessment Project, 2001, p. 8). The purpose of this work was to clearly identify the critical elements of positive youth development supported by research that could be quantified.

Out of this meeting, several working groups were appointed to conduct additional ground-setting work before a national assessment could be conducted. As a result, a smaller group of Extension specialists met in Kansas City in 1998 to identify the most important elements of positive youth development. Called the "Critical Elements Working Group,"

...this group's task was framed in the research question "What positive

outcomes in youth, adults, and communities result from the presence of critical elements in a 4-H experience." The group reviewed the basic and applied research on characteristics of effective programs for youth development. Emphasis was placed on using existing empirical research on what impacts positive youth development. Another criterion used by the group was relevancy to 4-H that could be communicated to colleagues, researchers and volunteers. From this process, eight elements critical to youth development emerged (p. 8).

The eight elements identified at this time were (Gregoire, 2004):

- A positive relationship with a caring adult
- A safe environment—physically and emotionally
- Opportunity for mastery
- Opportunity to value and practice service to others
- Opportunity for self determination
- An inclusive environment
- Opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future
- Engagement in learning

Shortly thereafter, in 2002, the National Research Council and Institute for Medicine came out with their "blue book" titled *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (2002). This report was the result of a 2-year project to integrate and evaluate a wide range of science related to adolescent development. From their work, they also identified eight features of positive youth development settings (p. 117):

- Physical and psychological safety
- Appropriate structure
- Supportive relationships
- Opportunities to belong
- Positive social norms
- Support for efficacy and mattering

Opportunities for skill building

- Integration of family, school, and community efforts

Obviously, the 4-H Critical Elements and the National Research Council's features of positive youth development settings share some similarities. Since then, no new information has been added to these respective lists.

Updating the Critical Elements

The time has come to update the list of critical elements for positive youth development. Like Howard Gardner's "multiple intelligences" that have expanded from the original seven to now include eight forms of learning based on what we continue to learn about human development (Armstrong, 2003; Gardener, 2012), it is time for us to re-consider our list and wonder if we have adequately captured the requisite skills young people need to transition for the second decade of life into adulthood. Gardener admitted his work was iterative and constantly evolving since he re-visited his own work every so often. He was fortunate, he says, to have had an opportunity to lay out his theory and "revisit the chessboard at decade intervals" (p. 13). We need to do the same.

But the paucity of work on interdependence as a feature in positive youth development is astounding. For example, Fetsch and Yang found only two articles in the *Journal of Extension* referencing empirical data on children related to cooperation from 1975 to 2001. In addition, these studies included only small numbers of participants. At the same time, though, they referenced a meta-analysis of 122 studies (Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981) that found that cooperation often resulted in superior end results:

Cooperation is considerably more effective than interpersonal competition and individualistic efforts in promoting achievement and productivity, and; cooperation without intergroup competition seems to promote higher achievement and productivity than cooperation with intergroup competition.

Reporting on their own study with 4-H and non-4-H members, Fetsch and Yang found that cooperation was a better strategy for building self-concept than competition and that 4-H programs needed to include more cooperative learning strategies in the future (Fetsch & Yang, 2002). While young people liked both competition and cooperation, the latter was more effective at developing personal strengths.

Yet the importance of interdependence and associational relationships is central to our history and culture. Alexis de Tocqueville, that astute observer of early American life, noted American's tendency to work together and form groups. de Tocqueville was intrigued by the number of associations and community groups in American as compared to Europe. In *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville credited our sense of community and mutual support as a key distinguishing feature for why democracy flourished in America. "In no country in the world has greater advantage been derived from association nor has this powerful instrument of action been applied to a wider variety of objectives than in America" (p. 220).

Wallace Stegner, one of the giants of American literature, was one of the first people to argue that our past was built, not upon rugged individualism, but rather on mutual interdependence. In *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1980) Stegner observed that:

When it (the West) fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery (p. 38).

Putnam (2000) argues that our myths of rugged independence as a foundation for the development of the nation are just that—myths.

Our national myths often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort....Paul Revere's alarm was successful only because of networks of civic engagement in the Middlesex villages. Towns without well-organized local militia, no matter how patriotic their inhabitants, were AWOL from Lexington and Concord (p. 24).

In *Hold Me Tight* (2008) Johnson discusses a 2006 National Science Foundation study that the number of individuals in people's circle of confidants was declining. To her, this is disturbing news because close personal relationships, ones in which people are interdependent, are so critical to physical and emotional health. "We need emotional attachments with a few irreplaceable others to be physically and mentally healthy—to survive" (p. 15). According to her research, "Today it is widely accepted that children have an absolute requirement for safe, on-going physical and emotional closeness and that we ignore this only at great cost" (p. 20). Yet, "our culture's established social and psychological ideas of adulthood: that maturity means being independent and self-sufficient" (p. 21).

While all of these make the case for interdependence, there is also a plethora of research on interdependence. Over 750 research studies (Johnson, 2003) conducted over the past 11 decades on the relative merits of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic efforts have demonstrated that superior performance and achievement results from cooperative strategies that stress the importance of mutual interdependence (your success=my success). Allen and Morton (2006) further delineated the skills set for interdependent relationships to include building teamwork, building partnerships, and managing conflict.

More Than Belonging

Let's be clear—interdependence is not just the critical element of "belonging" dressed up in different clothes. Belonging is about group identity and having a feeling of a group or member affiliation (Hensley, Place, Jordan, & Israel, 2007). Like a uniform, insignia, handshakes, or lore, belonging is more about a badge of group identity—such as "we are all Rotarians." But it is not about mutual interdependence. Belonging does not begin to scratch the surface of the critical interdependence of people to work toward common goals or purposes.

While there is much to be said for cultivating a sense of autonomy in young people, there are equally

persuasive reasons for fostering a sense of mutual interdependence and mutual reliance. Interdependence, unlike belonging, is about how our fates and futures are inextricably intertwined. Interdependence is an expression of how we produce better results and greater outcomes when we share expertise and work together in cooperative and collaborative ways. It encompasses the synergy that can occur when multiple minds get together and face an issue or problem so that the end result is better than anything anyone could have accomplished alone.

The late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this concept of interdependence quite well and spoke about it in his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech given the day before he was shot in Memphis, Tennessee. King recalled the story of the Good Samaritan and challenged us to think about why the priest and the Levite did not stop along the Jericho road to help a seriously injured man while the Good Samaritan did. Certainly the road was dangerous and robberies were common. There were a lot of reasons not to stop and provide aid to the injured man—after all, he may be faking it or he may have accomplices hiding nearby who would rob the travelers. Both the priest and the Levite asked themselves: "If I stop, what will happen to me?" But when the Good Samaritan came along, he reversed the question and asked himself: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" Now that is an example of interdependence.

Next Steps

It is time to update our list of critical elements. And who knows? There may be others identified. Land-grant university faculty and researchers are in an ideal position to help us keep this work current and up-to-date. No one else can take on this task.

Given the strong research base for including interdependence as the ninth critical element of 4-H positive youth development, what is next? I suggest several steps.

1. A national think tank should be convened to re-examine the latest research and review the current list of critical elements to determine if they need updating and expansion.
2. State 4-H Program leaders should establish a standing committee on research to ensure a focus on emerging research related to positive youth development. This committee should meet during the regular annual face-to-face meeting of the 4-H program leaders and by conference call at other times. This group should work closely with the Vice-President for Research and Evaluation in NAE4-HA.
3. A new model of 4-H positive youth development should be disseminated, based on this work, to ensure that the new information is promulgated far and wide.
4. Training should be conducted to help 4-H professionals and volunteers understand the importance of interdependence as a critical element of positive youth development.

With these efforts, we can ensure that our focus on the essential elements of positive youth development remains up-to-date and inclusive of the latest research and knowledge about human development.

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