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Training Teenagers as Food and Fitness Ambassadors for Out-of-School Programs

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Abstract: Using the Get Moving — Get Healthy with New Jersey 4-H (GMGH) curriculum, Mercer County 4-H recruited, trained, and supported 20 teenagers as Food and Fitness Ambassadors for out-of-school time programs. This article outlines the GMGH curriculum, the 13-hour Food and Fitness Ambassador training retreat, and the implementation of six GMGH events for collaborating after-school and summer day camp programs in Trenton, New Jersey.

Introduction

Training teenagers to promote healthy eating and physical activity habits to children in out-of-school programs can prove valuable for the teenagers and the after-school and summer program participants they instruct. Recently, several youth development practitioners (Braverman, Moskowitz, D'Onofrio, & Foster, 1994; Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006; Kims, 1999; Ponzio & Peterson, 1999; Smith, 2007; Walker, 2006) have reported success with their out-of-school-time teenagers-as-teachers programs. Their programs represent a diversity of curricular areas, including science, computer technology, drug and alcohol prevention, violence prevention, and leadership development. Most noted the benefits of having someone closer in age to the program recipients as the teachers, and all reported some positive outcomes for the teenage teachers, including improvements in leadership, teaching, problem solving, conflict resolution, and public speaking skills.

In the program described here, 4-H Youth Development faculty and staff recruited and trained 20 teenagers in the Get Moving — Get Healthy with New Jersey 4-H (GMGH) curriculum. The teenagers then served as Food and Fitness Ambassadors—planning and conducting GMGH events for several collaborating after-school and summer programs in Trenton, New Jersey.

Program Design and Implementation

Get Moving — Get Healthy Curriculum

Get Moving — Get Healthy with New Jersey 4-H is an interactive and fun way to learn healthy eating and physical activity habits. GMGH activity kits are a key component of the program and include nine activities: Exercise Challenge, Finding Your Pyramid, Healthy Plate, Measure Up, Portion Distortion, Read the Label, Serving Match, Think What You Drink, and What Counts. The GMGH kits include all of the demonstration items, supplies, and handouts needed for each activity. Each activity has a lesson plan that provides options for expanding the learning experience.

The GMGH resource disc (CD) includes background information; lesson plans; handouts; evaluation instruments; two-sided, full-color GMGH placemats; recipes for healthy snacks; and supporting materials for hosting GMGH events. The curriculum is flexible and can be presented in sections by an individual or team, as concurrent activity stations, or as a display within a larger community health fair. In this program, trained teenagers presented GMGH as activity stations to children in collaborating out-of-school programs.

Food and Fitness Ambassador Training

Mercer County 4-H professionals recruited 20 teenagers from Boys and Girls Club, New Jersey Youth Corps, and a local faith-based organization to become Food and Fitness Ambassadors. To be selected for the program, teenagers had to attend an orientation, complete an application, and receive a recommendation from their youth advisor.

The program was based on the principles found in the 4-H Afterschool Resource Guide, *Teens as Volunteer Leaders: Recruiting and Training Teens to Work with Younger Youth in After-School Programs* (Junge, 2005). This resource outlines 10 essential elements to utilizing teenagers as volunteers in after-school programs: dedicated adults who support teens, active teen recruitment, strong curriculum, initial training, ongoing training and support, attention to details, recognition and reward, team building, setting teens up for success, and feedback and evaluation.

One of the most critical of these is the quality and design of the initial training. The training must provide an opportunity for the teenagers and staff to learn about each other (team building), experience the curriculum, and practice their teaching.

The 20 teenagers and their adult advisors participated in a 2-day overnight training to prepare them for their role as Food and Fitness Ambassadors. The 13-hour training included a program overview, several team building activities, an introduction to the childhood obesity issue, an introduction to nutrition, and an in-depth introduction to the nine GMGH activities (with teens fully experiencing each activity). The teenagers also toured fruit and vegetable production at a local farm and participated in a fresh food demonstration dinner on the evening of the first day of training.

On the second day of training, teens worked in pairs to prepare and present lessons on selected GMGH activities, with constructive support and feedback from staff. They also created and enjoyed fresh fruit

smoothies, trail mix, salsa, and other healthy snacks that were incorporated into their GMGH after-school events. In addition, they finalized their Food and Fitness Ambassador t-shirts and developed action plans for their GMGH events. To further set the teenagers up for success, each of the three collaborating organizations was provided all of the resources needed to conduct GMGH events, including a GMGH resource CD and activity kit.

Get Moving — Get Healthy Out-of-School-Time Events

Each of the three collaborating organizations planned and conducted two Get Moving — Get Healthy events, for a total of six events for over 300 children (primarily ages 8-12) and staff at after-school programs and summer day camps sponsored by the City of Trenton, Boys and Girls Club, a neighborhood community center, and a charter school. All of the GMGH events were conducted between one and four months following the training.

The teenagers, with support from their advisors, contacted the sponsor of the collaborating programs, scheduled the GMGH event, promoted it with flyers, and finalized all of the preparations. On the day of the events, the teenagers typically set up activity stations around the perimeter of a gymnasium or large multi-purpose room. Groups of children then rotated through the stations with their teachers.

The stations included the nine GMGH activities, healthy after-school snacks, and, in some cases, pre and post-test stations. GMGH "temporary tattoos" were applied or distributed to help promote the program and encourage discussion of the activities at home. Take-home information was provided with GMGH placemats or MyPyramid for Kids materials available at www.mypyramid.gov.

Program Evaluation

At the end of the summer, following the completion of all of the GMGH events, 11 of the teenagers were able to attend a closing recognition luncheon. These 11 teenagers completed a 15-item retrospective pre-post life skills survey (Table 1). Their overall mean life skills score increased from 1.82 to 2.70. In addition, 11 of the teenagers completed a 10-item retrospective pre-post teaching skills survey (Table 2). Their overall mean teaching skills score increased from 1.92 to 2.75.

Table 1.
Life Skills Retrospective Pre-Post Survey Item Mean Scores

I have the ability to:	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean
1. organize a group activity	2.00	2.73
2. organize information	1.73	2.82
3. establish time use priorities	1.27	2.72
4. lead group discussions	1.82	2.64
5. evaluate programs	1.73	2.64
6. work as a team member	2.45	3.00

7. speak before a group	1.82	2.73
8. keep written records	1.27	2.55
9. see things objectively	1.73	2.73
10. follow a process to make decisions	1.91	2.64
11. plan programs	1.27	2.36
12. identify resources	1.91	2.64
13. share new ideas with others	2.18	2.91
14. teach others	2.00	2.64
15. meet with others	2.27	2.82
Note: Response scale, 0=no ability, 1=some ability, 2=good ability, 3=excellent ability		

Table 2.
Teaching Skills Retrospective Pre-Post Survey Item Mean Scores

I have the ability to:	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean
1) plan learning activities for youth	1.64	2.82
2) present information to a group of learners	1.82	2.82
3) recognize when learners need help	1.64	2.56
4) be a mentor to youth	2.56	2.82
5) work with a team of teens and adults	2.09	2.91
6) serve as a role model for youth	2.55	3.00
7) understand different learning styles	1.73	2.55
8) apply youth "ages and stages" in my teaching	1.82	2.82
9) provide experiential learning activities to youth	1.73	2.55
10) keep youth engaged in the learning process	1.64	2.73
Note: Response scale, 0=no ability, 1=some ability, 2=good ability, 3=excellent ability		

Conclusion

The Get Moving — Get Healthy with New Jersey 4-H curriculum proved an effective curriculum for training teenagers as Food and Fitness Ambassadors for out-of-school time programs. The teenagers improved valuable life skills and teaching skills while using experiential and research-based activities to promote healthy eating and physical activity habits. With after-school providers trying to meet several academic, social, and enrichment objectives, teenagers will continue to play a critical role in the delivery of programming to children enrolled in out-of-school programs.

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