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Adventure Programming in an After-School Environment

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



Adventure Programming in an After-School Environment

Abstract

4-H Afterschool Adventure is a 12-week adventure-based program that includes introductory personal development activities, a series of group initiative activities, and outdoor adventure activities. The life skill and character development program has involved urban youth from four after-school programs since early 2004. Based on surveys from 70 participants, youth have indicated increases in their leadership, communication, team building, and goal-setting skills. The after-school hours are a critical time for millions of youth, and properly sequenced and facilitated adventure programming is an engaging and effective way to help turn these hours from a time of risk to a time of opportunity.

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Introduction

Over 14 million or 25% of K-12 youth are unsupervised during the after-school hours (Afterschool Alliance, 2004). An increasing amount of research (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005) illustrates the need for quality after-school programming as well as the benefits of participation. One of the greatest assets of quality after-school programs is the opportunity for youth to develop competence in many areas that are placed secondary to academic achievement during the school day (Gootman, 2000; Halpern, 2005; Miller, 2003).

Adventure programming, because of its appealing and engaging nature and focus on life skill and character development, presents promise for 4-H professionals delivering programming in an after-school environment. Adventure programming includes properly sequenced and facilitated initiative activities (team and individual), challenge courses (low and high elements), and outdoor pursuits (such as canoeing, rock climbing, and hiking).

In early 2004, Mercer County 4-H developed 4-H Afterschool Adventure for youth enrolled in the City of Trenton's after-school initiative. 4-H Afterschool Adventure targets the development of five life skills (goal setting, problem solving, communication, team building, leadership) and four character traits (self-confidence, tolerance, respect, trust) from Webb's model, *The Developmental Stages of Recreation and Its Associated Benefits* (1996).

Program Design and Implementation

The 12-week program involves introductory personal development activities, a series of group initiative activities, and four outdoor adventure activities. The program has been delivered five times to a total of 100 youth at four after-school sites. 4-H staff meet with 20 youth for a minimum of 2-3 hours once a week.

Introductory Classroom-Based Activities

Three classroom-based programs are used to prepare the youth for successful participation in the group initiative activities and outdoor adventures: *Discovering My True Colors* (see <http://www.truecolors.org>); ©2000 True Colors, Inc.), *SMART Goal Setting* (Goal Setting Lessons, pp. 302-314, from RISE; University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System, 2000), and *Six*

The True Colors program, Flying Your True Colors for True Success (Lowry & Echols, 2000), is used to provide the students the opportunity to better understand their true selves. The participants identify their dominant personality type, which helps them have a clearer understanding of what motivates them at school, with their friends, and at home. By recognizing and appreciating the differences in others, the students are able to better communicate and partner with one another.

The principles of SMART Goal Setting are introduced during an early session of 4-H Afterschool Adventure. Participants discover the value of effective goal setting and learn how to set goals that are Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic, and Timely. During the group initiative activities and outdoor adventure activities, the participants have several opportunities to practice their goal setting skills.

An overview of the Six Pillars of Character focuses on activities that illustrate the traits of trustworthiness and respect as background information for the discussions that will occur during the debriefing of the group initiative activities.

Group Initiative Activities

During 4-H Afterschool Adventure, several group initiative activities (Cain & Jolliff, 1998; Rohnke, 1984, 1989; Rohnke & Butler, 1997) are utilized to foster life skill and character development. Initiative activities used include Key Punch, Moonball, Object Retrieval/Toxic Waste, TP Shuffle, Swamp Crossing, Pipeline, All Aboard, Life Raft, and Trolley. Group initiative activities provide the challenge and excitement needed to motivate the students and capture their attention. However, in order to be successful in each activity, the students eventually discover the necessity of effective leadership, team building, goal setting, communication, planning, and decision-making.

Activities are sequenced to allow the teams of participants several opportunities to build upon previously learned skills. 4-H staff facilitate and debrief each activity to capitalize on each "teachable moment" and allow the students to discuss and process the lessons learned from each activity.

Outdoor Adventure Activities

4-H Afterschool Adventure youth participate in a minimum of five outdoor adventure activities, including simulated rock climbing, horse grooming and riding, canoeing, and mountain biking. These outdoor adventure activities are included to provide participants an opportunity to experience physical and mental challenges that lie outside of their comfort zone. Through risk taking, trust, and commitment, youth are able to achieve beyond preconceived expectations--providing for increases in self-confidence.

Program Evaluation

Seventy of 100 participants completed a survey designed to collect their perceptions of the program's impact (Table 1). Participants responded to fifteen items using a scale of 1 to 5: NO WAY! (1), No (2), I Don't Know (3), Yes (4), ABSOLUTELY! (5).

Table 1.
Perceptions of Program Impact

% Answering Yes (4) or Absolutely (5)	Description of Change	Mean
96%	I gained a sense of accomplishment and felt proud to complete some of the activities.	4.54
94%	I learned how to work well with others to complete a task as a team.	4.29
90%	I challenged myself to accomplish things I normally wouldn't try.	4.34
87%	I learned how to provide leadership to a group in order to accomplish a task.	4.30
87%	I learned how to set SMART goals and work toward accomplishing them.	4.24
84%	I learned more about myself (my personality).	4.21
84%	I learned how to effectively communicate my ideas.	4.09
83%	I am more likely to participate in outdoor adventure activities.	4.30
77%	I have a greater appreciation for the outdoors.	4.00

77%	I am more likely to visit city, county, and state parks.	4.09
77%	I learned to listen to other people's ideas and use them when appropriate to solve a problem.	3.99
74%	I learned to recognize and accept the differences in my team members.	4.03
74%	I learned to value the contributions of each of my team members.	3.98
71%	I feel a greater sense of responsibility to conserve our natural environment.	3.81
54%	I learned to trust my peers.	3.54

The survey also asked the youth to list the two most important things they learned as a result of 4-H Afterschool Adventure. Of the 129 responses, 35 % indicated teambuilding or the value of teamwork, 9% indicated the value of commitment and persistence, and 6% indicated trust of peers.

Conclusion

4-H Afterschool Adventure demonstrates the potential for incorporating adventure programming into after-school programs. The introductory activities and group initiatives are mobile enough to easily be incorporated into any after-school program. The use of culminating outdoor adventure activities is dependant on the availability of such resources in the community. While adventure activities are often a small part of short programs, retreats, or camps, collaborating with after-school programs provides enough time to more fully realize the benefits of adventure programming. While not a primary objective, the program was also effective in increasing the youth's sense of appreciation and responsibility for their natural environment.

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