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Ropes Course Builds Confidence and Teamwork in Teens

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Abstract

4-H delivers programs that help develop many of the behaviors that ropes courses were designed to instill, especially leadership and teamwork. During the spring of 2004, 17 teenagers were recruited by the advisory committee, Extension agents, and other individuals to spend a weekend on a ropes course, aptly named "challenge outdoor personal experience" (C.O.P.E). Findings from an evaluation of the weekend indicated the activities built teamwork, confidence in oneself, and confidence in the group.

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Introduction

Ropes courses have been around since the early 70's. Their basic purpose was (and is today) to offer an educational method that resulted in increased self-esteem, awareness, motivation, self value, problem solving abilities, communication skills, conflict resolution, leadership abilities, and increased morale for individuals.

Corporations and organizations around the world began utilizing ropes courses in the early 80's as a means of motivating employees and increasing productivity. 4-H delivers programs that help develop many of the behaviors ropes courses were designed to instill, especially leadership and teamwork.

Organizing the Local Ropes Course

During the spring of 2004, 17 teenagers were recruited by the advisory committee, Extension agents, and other individuals in the parish to spend a weekend on a ropes course, aptly named "challenge outdoor personal experience" (C.O.P.E). The teenagers ranged in age from 13 to 18 years and represented youth from different cultural and economic backgrounds. All of the teens were currently enrolled in 4-H, and seven were also enrolled in JROTC.

The teens who participated in the spring 2004 4-H-sponsored course paid for half the cost of the weekend (or their half was paid by adult sponsors). The other half of the cost and the cost for food and refreshments came from donations from the local Kiwanis Club, the two local Lions Clubs, the local banks, two local volunteer fire departments, and a pizza restaurant.

Preparing for the Low Ropes Phase

The teens arrived at Avondale Boy Scout Reservation, the site of the ropes course, at 5 p.m., on a Friday. That evening, the teens put away their gear, ate a pizza dinner, met their course instructors and volunteers from the area Boy Scout District, and played get-to-know-you games.

On Saturday, after a 6:30 a.m. wakeup and 7 a.m. breakfast, the teens boarded a bus for the low ropes phase of the course. The teens were divided into two groups, and each group engaged itself in activities, including the spider web, the trolley, the trust fall, zig zag, nitro crossing, port hole, cat walk, whale watch, island, pirates crossing, and the 10-foot wall. Each one of these activities demanded teamwork from the groups and confidence in oneself and the group. For example, during the trust fall, teens fell backwards from a 3-foot stump into the arms of their waiting group members.

The High Ropes Phase

The high ropes phase of the course on Sunday demanded the trust and confidence developed during the activities in the low ropes phase, and the teens were ready for the challenge. After a 7 a.m. breakfast, the teen participants, during an hour-long high ropes school, learned how to make and wear a Swiss seat, how to pull and give slack on a line attached to a fellow participant, and what language to use during a climbing or rappelling activity. Participation in the high ropes phase involved climbing a rope ladder, walking on a v-shaped wire bridge 50 feet above the ground; zipping down to within 10 feet of the ground on a 200 foot-long cable, climbing a 20-foot rock wall, and rappelling down a 20-foot wooden wall.

Once again, these activities demanded teamwork and confidence in oneself and the group. For example, during the rope climb, group members on the ground were ready with belay ropes to stop a climbing member's unexpected fall.

Conclusion

Findings from an evaluation of the ropes course weekend indicated the activities built teamwork, confidence in oneself, and confidence in the group. The findings also indicated the instructors and the camp staff were very helpful in making the weekend rewarding.

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