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Parents' Perceptions of Life Skills Development in the 4-H Cloverbud Program

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Parents' Perceptions of Life Skills Development in the 4-H Cloverbud Program

Abstract

Life skills are an important component of 4-H Youth Development programs. The study reported addresses life skill development of 4-H members who are 5 to 8 years old (also known as 4-H Cloverbuds). The focus was to explore parents' perceptions of their child's life skills development, program benefits, and activities. Parents interviewed in this study viewed the 4-H Cloverbud program as influential in life skill development, particularly in the areas of social skills, learning to learn, and personal development (self-confidence, self-care, and self-direction). Parents also identified health and diversity as important areas. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

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Introduction

4-H Youth Development programs are designed to develop youth into confident, competent, and caring citizens. A focus on school-age children ages 5 to 8 extended the benefits of these programs to younger children (National 5-8 Curriculum Task Force, 1992). Although known by various names around the country (e.g., Cloverkids or 4-H Prep), Ohio adopted the name "4-H Cloverbuds" for its youngest 4-H members when the program officially began in 1994.

The 4-H Cloverbud program is designed to be noncompetitive, educational, activity-based, cooperative-learning centered, safe, developmentally age appropriate, and success-oriented (Scheer, 1997). The overall goal is to promote healthy development in children by advancing life skills. Involving children at a young age in positive learning experiences helps them build a foundation for a strong sense of self, optimism for the future, and mastery (Seligman, 1995).

Life skills are an important component of 4-H Youth Development programs. These skills allow individuals to respond to situations they experience in life and are applicable in more than one setting (Elias & Kress, 1994). Life skills must be included in ways that are developmentally appropriate when planning programs (Hendricks, 1996). Specifically, the Ohio 4-H Cloverbud program is designed to develop five life skills: self-esteem/self-confidence, social interaction, decision making, learning to learn, and physical mastery (Scheer, 1997). The question arises: How

successful are 4-H programs in developing these life skills?

Studies of life skills in 4-H indicate that participation in 4-H activities was positively related to life skill development (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Cantrell, Heinshon, & Doebler, 1989; Fox, Schroeder, & Lodi, 2003; Seevers & Dormody, 1995; Ward, 1996). Studies have taken a variety of approaches (e.g., alumni, participants vs. nonparticipants); however, only one examined the life skills of 5- to 8-year-olds.

Scheer and Lafontaine's (1999) study provided a general sense that adults associated with the program (i.e., parents, volunteers, and Extension professionals) believed it was beneficial for this age group. This study, while informative, provided limited understanding of what benefits those stakeholders perceived. Therefore, an investigation designed to solicit parents' perceptions of life skill development for this age group would contribute to existing literature on the topic.

Purpose

The focus of this study was to explore parents' perceptions of their child's life skills development, program benefits, and activities. Such information would enable those who work with the 4-H Cloverbud program to understand its strengths and identify areas for improvement.

Methods and Procedure

Children's level of cognitive and social development may present challenges because their communication skills, attention span, memory, self-perceptions, and ability to determine cause and effect develop over time (Flannery, 1990; Sengstock & Hwalek, 1999; Stone & Lemanek, 1990). It may be difficult for them to understand directions and the intent of questions, to read a survey instrument without assistance, or to write responses.

Perhaps this is why few studies have focused on 5- to 8-year-old children themselves in the 4-H program, instead gathering data from adults. This approach is valid, because adults are valuable sources of information regarding skill development. As well, parents are the key care providers and the decision makers regarding their child's involvement in activities, clubs, and education.

We selected focus group interviews as the method suited to obtain parents' perceptions related to the 4-H Cloverbud program. Recommendations provided by Morgan (1997; Morgan & Scannell, 1998) and Krueger (1998a; 1998b; Krueger & Casey, 2000) were used to plan the process and to construct the interview questions. Questions were designed to elicit parents' understanding of 4-H Cloverbud activities, their benefits, and the development of life skills (Hogue, 2002). A mock focus group was held to test the questions and to provide training for the focus group moderator, the second author. (Specific questions developed for the study are available by contacting the first author.)

To provide varied geographic representation, three counties in different parts of the state were selected to participate. County 4-H agents provided names and contact information. From a total of 42 4-H Cloverbud parents who were contacted, 25 were interested in participating. Several could not attend due to personal or family-related events. Only a few parents indicated lack of interest. From those 25 parents who had originally agreed to participate, 12 attended one of three focus group interviews. Lack of attendance was due to illness or last minute conflicts with child care. Of the 12 participants, 9 were female. Four served as club advisers in addition to their role as a parent.

Focus group interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using open coding, a process of breaking down, examining, comparing, and categorizing the data (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Categories were then grouped into overarching themes. The categorization was developed by consultation between the first and second authors. To address validity, two peer reviewers read the transcripts and reviewed themes to ensure an accurate interpretation of the data (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002).

Results and Discussion

Perceptions of Life Skills

The first objective was to identify parents' definitions and perceptions of life skills. Surprisingly, only half of the parents had heard of life skills. Despite that, they had an accurate understanding of the concept.

Parents understood how life skills played an important role in their child's development. They felt that the skills learned went beyond 4-H; they are skills that are carried over into future situations and are "what the child is going to need to succeed in life." An awareness of the community was also part of their definition of life skills. Those who were also club advisers knew about life skills, perhaps from having more contact through written materials and training (e.g., one parent, who was an adviser, brought a curriculum notebook to the focus group meeting).

Even though some parents had not heard of life skills, they mentioned three of the five specifically targeted in the Ohio 4-H Cloverbud program: learning to learn, social skills, and self-confidence.

Parents were not told which skills were targeted so that their perceptions could emerge from the discussion.

In addition, parents mentioned skills that we categorized as self-care and self-direction. What we have defined as self-care skills compares with the concepts of "personal safety" and "using resistance skills" that are part of major life skill models used in 4-H (Barkman & Machtmes, 2000; Hendricks, 1996). As well, "managing yourself" and "self-responsibility," which we termed self-direction, are also recognized as part of the "health" component in these models. The skills related to "self" dimensions might be broadly thought of as representing personal development.

Enhancing life skills was important to parents. They identified that by participating in Cloverbuds, children have "a chance to do things independently." Parents noted that "[having] no social skills limits you," so having opportunities to interact with others was particularly important (e.g., "talking with groups"). The definitions and skills discussed by parents are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Parents' Perceptions of Life Skills Encompassed in the 4-H Cloverbud Program

Life Skill	Categorization of Parents' Descriptions
Social Interaction ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Learning how to be part of a group and how to get along by taking turns, sharing, teamwork, and cooperation ◦ Noncompetitive • Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Being exposed to relationships with adults and children of different ages ◦ Learning to respect themselves and others ◦ Learning to relate to other people • Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Speaking in public and being comfortable with it
Learning to Learn ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to gain knowledge
Self-Confidence ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-confidence • Sense of self-esteem
Self-Care ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Memorizing their address and phone number ◦ Learning specific information such as poisons around the house, which drugs to avoid, and when to talk to strangers • Independence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Once children learn safety, parents hoped that they could use those skills to become more independent and resourceful.
Self-Direction ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing patience, responsibility, accountability, self-control • Carrying something through to completion
<p>¹Skills identified by parents that are targeted by the Ohio 4-H Cloverbud program ²Skills identified by parents</p>	

Perceptions of Benefits

Rather than simply identifying that the program was beneficial, parents were able to expand on the particular benefits they saw. They indicated that the learning component was important to them and that "entertainment" was least important. That is, "it is fun, but they are learning while having fun." Having a group "just for them" enabled it to be geared to the children's needs. Even at an early age, they are having the opportunity to "speak in public and be comfortable with it." Overall, 4-H Cloverbuds is appropriate because parents feel it is positive, fits children's needs, and helps them feel special by having their own group.

It was a surprise to hear that not only do the children benefit from their participation, the parents also felt they benefited personally from the 4-H Cloverbud program. Parents enjoyed the social time with other parents while their children were participating in the meetings and activities. Parents' involvement in their child's school (Epstein, 1995) and out-of-school (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002) activities takes many forms and produces many benefits. Therefore, participation of parents in Cloverbud activities is encouraged to promote healthy interaction between child and parent through activities that are centered around the child.

Perceptions of Activities

Another objective was to describe parents' perceptions of activities. They acknowledged that structure of meetings facilitates skill development (e.g., punctuality, following directions). They supported the idea of a noncompetitive approach. Parents mentioned hands-on activities, fair, camp, community service, and craft activities. Two different opinions were expressed about craft activities. Some parents questioned the value of craft projects, while others understood how they fit into the curriculum, that is, that they are "tied into what is being learned."

Activities were seen as the vehicle for life skill development. An approach that emphasizes the experiential learning model is presented in 4-H Cloverbud curriculum (Grawemeyer, Gibbons, Horton, 1994; Safrit & Gibbons 1995; Scheer, 2000). In other cases, they believed the learning is more indirect, as children "learn how meetings are conducted just from being there."

Although their impression was overwhelmingly positive, parents did address several gaps in the program. One parent mentioned that her child's club was not organized. Others expressed concern that those without prior knowledge of 4-H (i.e., you have to be "born into it") may not know about Cloverbuds. Some parents indicated that, while there were potential benefits of learning about and experiencing diversity, this was not occurring in the program. Health was another area that could be strengthened for 4-H Cloverbuds. Both diversity and health appear in 4-H life skill models (Barkman & Machtmes, 2000; Hendricks, 1996).

Conclusions

Parents interviewed in this study viewed the 4-H Cloverbud program as influential in life skill development. Similar to past research on life skills development in 4-H, youth were developing skills in social interaction, learning, and personal development. However, this study expanded on past research by addressing parents' unique conception of life skills and activities that they believe contributed to their development. They stressed the importance of 4-H as an environment where children are having fun while learning important skills that are beneficial now and later in life. Furthermore, this study addressed life skill development for 4-H's youngest members.

The qualitative findings of this study support the quantitative stakeholder results of the Scheer and Lafontaine (1999) investigation in which 91% of the parents (252 of 277) perceived the program as beneficial. These stakeholders also believed that children were improving their life skills of making friends (89%), making choices (83%), learning to learn (78%), self-esteem (73%), and physical mastery (61%).

Parents mentioned a variety of skills categorized under the broad category of health skills as important; however these skills are not currently included as specific goals of the 4-H Cloverbud program. Parents did not mention the life skills of decision making and physical mastery. This may be a reflection of the small sample size, as the Scheer and Lafontaine (1999) study indicated that parents believed children developed these skills. These skills are often embedded in the activities and the way they are structured (see Grawemeyer, Gibbons, & Horton, 1994; Safrit & Gibbons, 1995; Scheer, 2000). However, if the intent of the activities is not clear, the underlying life skills may not have been recognized.

Implications

Implications for Research

Several limitations and opportunities for future research should be noted. Scheduling challenges affected the number of individuals who were able to participate in the focus groups. The nature of the sample limits the generalizability of the findings to the larger population of 4-H Cloverbud programs. Although it was a selected group of participants, the parents were found to be a rich source of information about the 4-H Cloverbud program. Detailed, descriptive information can be obtained through qualitative means that is not feasible with larger samples. Future studies could continue to explore parents' perceptions employing a larger, more representative sample.

Information was based on parents' perceptions of their children's life skills development at the time of the study and may not represent their children's actual life skills development. That is, no measures were administered to determine the child's level of skills development in the targeted areas (e.g., social interaction). Future research could employ appropriate measures to make such a determination (e.g., Smith & Enfield, 2002). However, the challenge will remain to find measures that are appropriate for both the topic of interest and for young children.

Another suggestion for future research is a study focusing on 4-H Cloverbud alumni members.

Those children who were involved in 4-H Cloverbuds when the program started in Ohio in 1994 are now in their teens. Studies that target those 4-H members could provide valuable information regarding their life skill development (e.g., see Fox et al., 2003). Furthermore, despite the challenges discussed earlier, studies gathering data from 4-H Cloverbud members themselves using developmentally appropriate measures should be pursued.

Implications for Practice

This study also has several implications for Extension programs.

- Incorporate age-appropriate activities that promote health and diversity.
- Continue to promote active parent participation.
- Educate parents and the community about the variety of 4-H Cloverbud activities that are available.
- Educate parents about the goals and life skills of the 4-H Cloverbud program.
- Develop evaluation strategies that target the children to provide additional validation of the 4-H Cloverbud program beyond parent input.

It is necessary to intentionally promote the philosophy and developmentally age-appropriate structure of the 4-H Cloverbud program and these intentions must be communicated to parents. If parents are aware of the specific goals of the program, they are more apt to be able to reinforce this learning in the home and lives of their children.

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