

New
Jersey **4-H**

Leader Training Series



Developing a Positive Self-Concept

How Do I Help 4-H Members Develop a Positive Self-Concept?

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One of the major life-skills that are developed through the 4-H Program is “Developing A Positive Self-Concept.”

As a 4-H Volunteer, you have many opportunities to make a positive impact on each 4-H member’s self concept. Every important adult in a child’s life influences his/her belief in his/her own value to others and to him/herself. This includes parents, teachers, 4-H leaders, grandparents, older brothers and sisters, youth leaders and religious leaders.

What is a positive self-concept? It is a growing belief about yourself that helps you to cope successfully with the events in your life, and then to make a positive impact on the lives of others.

As a 4-H youth leader, your attitude of non-judgmental, acceptance toward each child is essential. This helps each member feel accepted as the person he/she is, rather than for behavior, clothes or skills. One way to do this is to show genuine appreciation for each individual. If you aren’t genuine, a child will know it right away.

Feedback—Genuine appreciation is also positive feedback. Although we would like to be able to only give positive feedback, part of being an adult role model for youth includes making corrections. You are probably asking, “How can I make corrections constructively?”

Since each child is unique and already has a self-concept in the process of development, you cannot guarantee how a child will accept correction. Experts recommend that all feedback include at least 75 percent positive comments as you make a correction to keep things in balance. A division of 50/50 positive comments to criticism doesn’t work. Your 4-H members may feel unworthy unless you use the 75/25 balance.

For example, “You have done an excellent job on this record book. Your handwriting is neat, you have reported all of your expenses, and your story follows the guidelines. However, you did not include the number of 4-H meetings you attended. Next year, you might want to keep a tally on your 4-H calendar so you can fill in this part of your record book easily.”

Expressing Acceptance—You can help express acceptance by seeing beyond a behavior to the true self within each 4-H'er. One technique that may help youth discover their uniqueness is to distribute 3x5 cards, at the end of each meeting, and ask them to list the things they liked about themselves during the meeting.

You could also invite your members to list what they learned and encourage them to discover things that were not part of the “lesson plan.” There should be no right answers to match, but all things learned should be encouraged so each person can discover the variety of learnings that take place in a group.

Nonjudgmental Attitude—Your attitude to each 4-H member will be obvious to the children. Even though adults have learned how to say one thing and do another, children often see through this immediately. So it is important to be honest within yourself as you notice your relationship with each youth. Having and expressing a non-judgmental attitude is an important part of helping youth develop a positive self-concept.

Within the group setting you can help the members remove their judgments from situations by demonstrating neutral behavior. When a person in the group shares an experience, feeling, or a thought, the leader accepts it as the true expression of that person at that moment. For example, if a youngster says he could not bring his record book because his parents wouldn't let him, the leader and members don't attack him with, “You're lying. That's not true. You just forgot it.” Instead, the leader sets a positive example by saying, “Okay. Let's work together with your parents so you can bring it to the next meeting.”

Listening - By listening to a child and treating them with respect, you are in turn facilitating self-respect. Not only should you give all children a chance to speak, you should listen to them attentively and acknowledge what they are saying. You should speak to children as you would speak to an adult and listen to them as you would an adult.

Where Does One's Self-Concept Come From?

Self-Confidence Expressed

Caring—Adults, who communicate to youth a sense of caring and a sense of personal worth, help to increase each person's positive self-concept. You can do this by creating an environment of mutual support and caring. As the club leader, you can gently help every member have a chance to share his thoughts with the group so the most talkative person doesn't overshadow a more quiet personality.

Fairness is also very important in establishing self-respect and self-acceptance. Children are very aware of whether a leader is fair or not. The rules you establish should apply to all children, not just the ones you feel are least favorable.

You will have reached this goal when the members trust one another and the leader enough to be at ease when expressing their feelings openly, and know they will not be ridiculed. This atmosphere of trust and acceptance will help young people recognize that they are valued and can count on receiving genuine affection and support.

How you think and feel about yourself, your self-image is learned. This began at birth, with your parents and other care givers. They gave you verbal and non-verbal feedback on your behavior. Other persons in your environment, and the nature of the community itself, also contribute to self-concept.

These experiences with the important people in your life, help determine whether you will feel acceptable or not valued.

Some people will give you the message that, although you may at times behave in unacceptable ways, you are basically an okay person. Others may give a negative message: "You are bad because you do bad things." Either of these messages, given over and over as you grow up, influence how you see yourself. By the time a child reaches school age, the self-concept is quite developed.

Although the early influences have a significant impact, it is possible to change self-concept. You, as a youth volunteer, can be part of the gradual process of building a positive self-concept for youth, as well as for yourself.

Genuinely confident people know they can handle whatever challenges life brings their way. They are willing to learn and are

What Can I Do About My Self-Concept?

not afraid of making mistakes. They feel good inside, and like themselves. They have strong self-respect. And they have an equal amount of respect for the feelings and capabilities of other people. They feel inferior to no one and superior to no one.

There is great potential within each of us. No matter what problems we have, even if we are physically injured or mentally disabled, that potential is still there. It is upon this inner resource that confidence must be built; not on looks, intelligence, money, popularity, athletic ability, or social status.

You are in charge of your self-concept, too. All of the things we've said about helping youth develop a positive self-concept apply to everyone. You will find that by genuinely expressing your caring for others enthusiastically, even when your feelings are saying, "I don't feel like it," will cause you to feel better.

You are a special person who volunteers to work with 4-H youth, and you know in your heart that you really care about young people.

Expressing your true self, and being genuine and accepting are the keys to helping 4-H members increase their positive self-concept.

Remember: you are an incredible person! Within you is wisdom, love and joy. Never sell yourself short.

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