

4-H Shine Up and Step Out: Engaging Youth with Disabilities in service

Mitzi S. Downing, Ed.D.
Extension Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist
Department of 4-H Youth Development and Family & Consumer Sciences
North Carolina State University
Campus Box 7606, Raleigh, NC, 27695
Tel. 919-515-8487 * FAX: 919-515-7812 * E-mail: mitzi_downing@ncsu.edu

Abstract

4-H Shine Up and Step Out is a volunteer-facilitated program that engages both youth and adult volunteers in a series of activities that bring to light disability-related issues and barriers often faced when individuals with disabilities want to participate in community service and volunteer programs. Guided by a comprehensive inclusion curriculum, young people and adults gain valuable experience and skills that enable them to successfully interact and work with individuals with disabilities, especially youth with disabilities. The curriculum model is easily adaptable to any youth-serving organization and agency that wishes to become more inclusive and engage youth or adult volunteers with disabilities.

Key Words:

disabilities, youth, adults, inclusion, volunteers

Introduction

Our world faces profound challenges that require the engagement of youth and adults, including those with disabilities, as active citizens and volunteers if we are to effectively overcome them. Now more than ever, all young people desire the opportunity to participate in the civic life of their communities. If performed within structured programs and organizations, youth volunteerism and service is a proven intervention strategy that helps all young people navigate childhood and transition to adulthood by building connections to their communities, making academics interesting and relevant, providing resiliency when circumstances inevitably change, promoting positive social behaviors, preparing youth for the workplace, and providing them with lifelong habits of leadership, problem-solving, empathy, and self-reliance.

Unfortunately, youth with disabilities are frequently overlooked as volunteers or

providers of service, and have not been encouraged or given the opportunity to serve. While many obstacles can deter youth with disabilities from volunteering and participating in community service opportunities, a volunteer program's outreach efforts are more likely to succeed if paid and volunteer staff are aware of disability-related issues that might arise in recruiting and working with youth, and the program's present strengths and weaknesses are assessed with respect to engaging youth with disabilities.

Program Overview

Implemented in local communities, the *4-H Shine Up and Step Out* is a volunteer-facilitated program, delivered through youth organizations and agencies, developed by the Cooperative Extension 4-H Youth Development Program at North Carolina State University. Through this comprehensive curriculum, youth and adults

partner together to gain knowledge and to participate in hands-on activities that simulate barriers and obstacles that youth with disabilities face daily. The 12-lesson curriculum features activities such as navigating an obstacle course while simulating mobility and visual impairments and doing an onsite evaluation for accessibility. Several lessons emphasize etiquette for working with youth (and adults) with disabilities, the use of “person-first language,” assistive technology, and communication. The overall goal of the program is to provide youth and adults with effective strategies for engaging youth with disabilities in their programs.

Requirements and Implementation

Volunteer involving organizations have used the *Shine Up and Step Out* curriculum in a number of different (and often, multiple) ways. The curriculum is designed to be lead by an older-youth (i.e., cross-peer delivery involving teens teaching younger youth) or adult volunteer leader or facilitator who has successfully completed the curriculum training. Involving youth with disabilities in volunteer and community service efforts often means providing for accommodations that remove barriers to involvement. When recruiting and engaging volunteers with disabilities, program staff should be aware of potential challenges:

- (1) it is not always obvious what accommodations are most appropriate for a given person or situation;
- (2) many individuals have not been in situations where they meet, much less know, individuals who have a disability;
- (3) organizations that place youth with non-profit agencies must be aware of tokenism (i.e., young people with disabilities engage in volunteerism to gain real experience and to serve and

to contribute to their communities, not to be “token” members of a committee or advisory panel).

At the completion of the curriculum training, *Shine Up and Step Out* youth and adult volunteers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in implementing the program. Working in partnership with paid staff of the organization, volunteers should understand that youth coping with both adolescence and a disability face difficult life adjustments and challenges, such as dealing with the limitations of their disability; recognizing, expressing, and accepting their feelings; understanding how others feel about and react to their disability; and just being a teenager . . . one who is also a person with a disability.

Benefits

As social capital declines in the economic and social reality today (Putnam, 2000), youth volunteering can offer important opportunities to other young people, and to volunteer/service organizations to help overcome social exclusion and social discord. In addition to personal gain, youth volunteers were found to have more positive attitudes toward society: volunteers acquired social responsibility, had more knowledge about others in their community, improved their skills, and were more capable of decision making than non-volunteers (Sundeen & Raskoff, 2000). As youth volunteer with other youth, they promote social inclusion and the trustworthiness of the organization in the eyes of the clients. Youth volunteers who worked with people with disabilities showed greater willingness to interact with disabled people than non-volunteers (Carter, Hughes, Copeland, & Breen, 2001).

The 4-H *Shine Up and Step Out* curriculum may be used with any youth organization that seeks to expand their programming to include youth with

disabilities. The curriculum aims to support volunteer and community service organizations looking to engage youth with disabilities as program volunteers, yet may have concerns about proper etiquette, accommodation strategies, and overcoming misconceptions.

For too long, individuals with disabilities have been viewed as recipients and not providers of service. In an effort to encourage everyone to serve, the *Shine Up and Step Out* curriculum challenges volunteer resource managers to consider ways to involve youth volunteers with disabilities in volunteer programs. It is critical that we all begin to view youth with disabilities as valuable and skilled resources, rather than individuals who are only able to participate on the receiving end of volunteer service.

The *Shine Up and Step Out* curriculum can be ordered directly from Dr. Mitzi Downing at North Carolina State University (mitzi_downing@ncsu.edu). The cost is

\$5.00.

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About the Author

Mitzi Downing, Ed.D. is an Extension Assistant Professor and Specialist at North Carolina State University. Dr. Downing has spent more than 15 years working for Cooperative Extension with a focus on partnerships and collaborations, and equity, access and opportunity. Working with county Extension professionals and non-profit leaders, Dr. Downing has broad expertise in developing and implementing sustainable programs that bring together youth, families, and communities.