

**4-H PetPALS: A Volunteer-Facilitated Program Engaging Youth, Seniors,
and Individuals with Disabilities**

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Abstract

4-H PetPALS (People and Animals Linking Successfully) is a volunteer-facilitated program that links young people, pets, adult volunteers, and seniors in a cross-generational educational experience. Guided by a comprehensive curriculum, young people gain valuable experience and skills that will enable them to successfully interact and work with senior adults and individuals with disabilities. The curriculum model is easily adaptable to any youth-serving organization and agency that works with local senior and/or assisted living facilities.

Key Words:

seniors, cross-generational, individuals with disabilities, pets

Introduction

More than 37 million people over the age of 65 live in the United States, with more than 14 million of those individuals having a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). With increased family mobility, geographic distances, and multiple marriages affecting today's American family, it is often difficult for strong grandparent-grandchild relationships to develop. Few of today's youth have much contact with older adults in their communities. It is easy for young people and senior adults to have stereotyped views of each other instead of seeing each other as individuals with real feelings, needs, and desires. When youth and senior adults do interact, new friendships develop and existing relationships are enhanced. Senior adults can teach youth how to make decisions and overcome some of life's

obstacles. Youth can share with older adults what it is like growing up in today's society with its endless opportunities and difficulties. Both young people's and older adult's lives are enriched as linkages across generations are developed within families and communities.

Curriculum/Program Overview

Implemented in local communities, 4-H PetPALS (People and Animals Linking Successfully) is a volunteer-facilitated program, delivered through youth organizations and agencies, developed by Ohio State University Extension, 4-H Youth Development. Designed as a comprehensive curriculum, youth, senior adults and companion animals are joined together to enhance cross-generational communications and understanding. The overall goal of the program is to provide a vehicle by which

cross-generational communication is enhanced, strengthened, and promoted for the benefit of youth and adults. Participants gain practical and useful knowledge and skills that will prepare them to work with and support senior adults and individuals with disabilities.

A key component of the 4-H PetPALS program is the engagement of Master 4-H PetPALS volunteers who teach youth skills needed to participate in animal-assisted activities with residents in senior assisted-living and skilled nursing facilities. Adult volunteers are required to participate in a comprehensive and rigorous training and workshop prior to working with youth who will visit senior healthcare facilities.

During the required training program, adult volunteers learn how to implement and adapt the curriculum to fit their specific club or group needs, including how best to work with and support individuals with varying levels of ability. The volunteers bring pets they plan to use during program instruction to the workshop. This allows the adult participants to learn more about their own pets' behaviors, and better understand what is required of them to be successful when visiting and interacting with individuals with varying levels of ability. It also serves as a foundation from which to transfer their experiences to the youth (and pets) they plan to teach.

Using the experiential learning model, volunteers learn to identify how dogs, cats, and rabbits communicate; how to approach, temperament test, socialize, and train these animals for animal-assisted activities; and how to conduct the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen tests and Socialized 4-H PetPALS tests, which animals must pass prior to participating in 4-H PetPALS animal-assisted activities. Volunteers also learn how to recognize stress and its implications in visiting animals, and how the pets use calming

signals to displace their stress. Master 4-H PetPALS volunteers learn how to familiarize pets with medical equipment (including wheel chairs, walkers, canes, etc), noises, odors, and the unique physical environment of assisted living facilities. Additional strategies that volunteers learn include how to implement pet wellness programs, the animal health requirements of different facilities, the importance of well-balanced, high quality nutrition, and daily exercise for the pets.

After learning about activities of daily living and other qualifications of independent living for senior adults, health conditions related to aging, as well as non-age-related medical conditions, are discussed. This discussion is followed by volunteers engaging in sensitivity training, stroke simulations, eye condition simulations, and hearing and speech impairment recognition activities. Volunteers also learn communication techniques for people with many different conditions, such as Alzheimer's disease, hearing impairment, and stroke conditions.

Selecting facilities and preparing for the visit are critical components of successful programs. Throughout the training, volunteers learn how to select a facility, contact that facility, meet with the appropriate administrator and staff, and learn the facility's protocol, including the best times to visit, how to bring closure to visits, and how to prepare youth if a resident they visit dies. Meeting with staff and visiting the facility prior to the program provides an opportunity for adult volunteers to learn about the residents and better understand their ability and comfort level when interacting and communicating with youth and their pets. Discussion is always held with volunteers on how to determine when it is not appropriate to visit with a particular pet due to stress, age, or health

issues, or when young people should not visit.

Finally, volunteers engage youth in role playing activities where youth and their pet's role play with other youth who are acting as senior adults or people with disabilities. Following these activities, youth and their pets actually visit the facility under the volunteer's guidance, and then debrief after the visits.

Requirements and Implementation

A 4-H PetPALS club or group must be lead by a Master 4-H PetPALS Volunteer Leader or facilitator who has successfully completed a comprehensive and rigorous training program. When recruiting and engaging volunteers, program staff should identify individuals who: (1) understand the key elements of a positive youth development experience; (2) are committed to youth people and their growth; (3) are dedicated to young people and sensitive to their abilities and needs; (4) commit to following organizational policies and procedures; (5) actively participate in a 6-hour workshop; and (6) commit to recruiting young people to be a part of the program.

At the completion of the required workshop, 4-H PetPALS volunteer leaders are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully implement the program. Working in partnership with paid staff of the organization, volunteer leaders should follow the steps below to begin their programs: (1) identify a minimum of five youth, ages 9-18 and their pets; (2) provide training to youth and their pets, including socialization skills; (3) identify local facilities for youth and pets to visit; and (4) engage parents/guardians in programs.

Benefits

There are significant benefits for youth, pets, volunteers, and service recipients as a result of participating in the

4-H PetPALS program. By engaging in the 4-H PetPALS project, youth learn to select, socialize, and train appropriate pets to participate as youth-pet teams in animal-assisted activities. Participants learn how animals behave and communicate, and how to interpret their own pet's temperament and personality. Further, young people practice safe and humane animal handling techniques, involve their pets in wellness programs, and practice responsible pet ownership and care.

As part of the curriculum, youth wear components of an instant aging kit and participate in aging sensitivity simulation activities to learn about the physical changes associated with aging. Sensitivity activities also focus on learning about medical conditions that young people and adult volunteers may encounter, as well as communication strategies when meeting senior adults and/or individuals with disabilities. While focused on aging, the same activities are relevant for working with individuals with disabilities who may be the same age as the young person.

Conclusion

The 4-H PetPALS curriculum may be used with any youth organization that seeks to expand their programming to include a cross-generational relationship with pets as one vehicle. Regardless of the organization, the steps that must be implemented to be successful include (1) introduction to human-animal interactions; (2) understanding animal behavior; (3) identifying appropriate animals; (4) learning about senior adults; (5) identifying a residential living facility to visit; (6) preparing youth for the visit; (7) conducting the visit without the pets; (8) preparing pets to visit; (9) practicing with pets; and (10) visiting the facility with the pets. Implementing each of these steps according to the curriculum will result in a positive

experience for young people as they learn about the human-animal bond, and strengthen their understanding of senior adults and physical limitations that individuals may have.

The 4-H PetPALS curriculum can be ordered through Ohio State University Extension Media Distribution (tel. 614-292-1607) via the online catalog at <http://estore.osu.-extension.org> The Product Code for this curriculum is 230GPM and the cost is \$32.25.

References

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About the Authors

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