



## INCLUSIVE 4-H: WELCOMING YOUTH WITH A WIDE RANGE OF ABILITIES INTO YOUR 4-H PROGRAM

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes that children with disabilities and their families should consider participation in extra curricular activities. However, this often does not happen due to exclusionary practices, whether intentional or unintentional. Extra-curricular activities such as 4-H can be greatly beneficial to children with disabilities. 4-H activities can be a valuable way to gain new skills such as responsibility, integrity, leadership, and communication. Extra curriculars can also help these children build relationships, explore their interests, and gain a sense of belonging. With some intentional planning, 4-H can be an inclusive program for children with disabilities and their families.

Studies have shown that there appears to be limited interaction between families of children with disabilities and families of children with no disabilities. Although they may be interested in participating in clubs and organizations, families may feel self-conscious about joining groups designed for children without disabilities. They may feel overwhelmed by their child's disability and may worry about their child being unable to build friendships with or be accepted by their peers.

All youth need opportunities to be involved in activities unique to their own talents and interests. 4-H can be an empowering pathway for youth with disabilities and their families to receive what they want and need: the opportunity to be involved, make friendships, and gain life skills.

An Inclusive Organization is one that:

- Recognizes that people are the same but also different
- Creates chances for others to experience freedom to participate
- Values each person and diversity
- Supports participation

4-H members without disabilities benefit from an inclusive 4-H program, because they begin to see that everyone, regardless of ability levels, has strengths and weaknesses, has their own unique abilities, and have more in common than they may have realized. Members with disabilities are encouraged to use their unique skills to benefit the rest of the club.

## YOUR ROLE AS A 4-H VOLUNTEER OR EXTENSION PROFESSIONAL

- You have the opportunity to gain new skills.
- It is important for Extension professionals and volunteers to take the responsibility to contact families of children with disabilities who are interested in 4-H and explain the benefits that 4-H has for all children.
- The 4-H member is more important than the project. The development of character should be what is focused on first and foremost in a 4-H program.
- Project work is one of the best devices for developing young people. To 'learn by doing' is fundamental to education and is characteristic of the 4-H program.
- Competition should focus on what a member has learned or gained from a project and less on how the final product turns out.
- Although adults may have the best intentions when they start out, if they complete the work for a 4-H member, the member will gain little, except perhaps a feeling that adults will do all of their work for them.
- Every 4-H member needs to be noticed, feel important, achieve some degree of success, and be praised.
- Extension professionals and volunteers should provide opportunities for members to have input into what they want out of 4-H and how to achieve their goals.

## SERVING AS A ROLE MODEL

A lot of responsibility falls on 4-H Extension professionals and volunteers to find appropriate ways to include individuals with disabilities in 4-H programs. Members will be watching to see how Extension professionals and volunteers go about including an individual with a disability. Here are some tips that will help make 4-H a successful inclusive program:

- Display a **positive attitude**. Look at inclusion as a way to give youth of all abilities an opportunity to become their best. 4-H members count on leaders to provide them with examples of how to relate to a member with a disability, and the best way to teach this is with words of encouragement and a smile.
- **Everybody counts**. When planning activities, take into account everyone that will be participating, and then design the activities so that each individual's needs can be met. Make sure that each member feels he or she is an important and unique part of the group.
- **Adaptation is acceptable**. Throw out the idea that "this is just how we have always done it." Take on the new idea that "we can work together to find a way to include everyone."

When a child with a disability becomes involved in 4-H, it is important to learn about the disability. It is even more essential to understand how the disability affects this particular child, and what accommodations may be needed in order for the child to best participate in 4-H. When doing this, it is important to include the child and his or her family and seek their opinions. The series of resources available from the Inclusive 4-H webpage is one way to learn about a wide variety of disabilities.

When choosing 4-H projects, keep the member's interests in mind.

- Don't attempt to push the member in a different direction if you believe they cannot complete the project.
- Consult others when determining accommodations that can be made for projects or activities. Talk to the state 4-H program coordinator or state youth specialists and/or county extension specialists, along with the member and his or her parents.
- Network with other 4-H Extension professionals who may have experience developing accommodations for members.

An important point to remember when working with persons with disabilities is to keep the person—not the disability—first. The person's disability should be thought of as a characteristic of him or her, not the whole of who the person is. Everyone has his or her own set of attributes that goes beyond the type or status of a disability.

Whenever you learn about a child with a disability joining your 4-H program, do not view them as a challenge you must “deal with” but a new opportunity for growth. Find new and fun ways to get them involved and treat them with the same respect you would anybody else. These children and their families want the same opportunities from 4-H that anybody else would have; make that happen for them.

*Updated March 2021 by Molly Bull Childers. Reviewed by Mandie Waling, Purdue Disability Resource Center.*

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