

idea corner

We Both Count

Unwed teenage mothers aren't traditional 4-H Club members. Yet, "We Both Count," a 4-H Club for adolescent moms and babies, was born in Webster County, Iowa. Its birth wasn't without fear, misconceptions, and prejudice.

Why aren't 4-H Clubs for teenage single mothers common? The answers may lie in the assumptions made by Extension staff. How often do we *not* reach out to nontraditional clients because we assume: lack of clientele interest or recruitment problems; lack of appropriate leadership (volunteer and staff); lack of community support and acceptance; and the fear the 4-H structure won't fit the special needs?

Recruitment

Of the 14 pregnant teenagers invited to join the 4-H Club, 10 enthusiastically accepted. The age of the participants ranged from 14-16. Recruitment had been predicted as a stumbling block. In reality, the preconceived ideas and attitudes of the staff about working with this audience proved more a concern than the motivation of the clients.

Leadership

The club received leadership from a 19-year-old mother of a 3-year-old son who had successfully met the challenges of being an adolescent single parent herself. The Extension 4-H agent, the club leader, the Extension home economist, and the Extension

human development specialist worked to provide support in areas of programming. Due to the complex concerns of the club members, no one staff person had the expertise to "carry the ball alone." The freedom of the club leader to draw on and share expertise created a security and strength previously not anticipated.

Acceptance and Support

Gaining support and sanction for the program from the County Extension Council and County Extension 4-H Committee was a trying experience. Committee reactions were at first cautious. Some felt this program would give 4-H a "bad name." One committee member was particularly concerned about the negative influence this type of club would have on 4-H members. The tension was broken when another member appropriately asked, "Do you think someone is going to get pregnant just so she can join this 4-H Club?"

Since the participants were all too young to drive and scattered throughout the county, volunteer drivers were supplied by neighboring churches. Volunteers juggled and diapered infants ranging from 8 days to 2 years of age during meetings. Donations were contributed by industry, service clubs, the 4-H Foundation, and a local church.

Traditional 4-H Structure

The local club leader helped the

staff realize how tradition-bound 4-H can be. A large effort was made to tailor the program to meet the needs of the club members, yet opportunities for involvement in traditional activities were provided. The girls appropriately named their club, "We Both Count."

Members requested programs on: labor and delivery, infant feeding problems, relationship hassles, weight loss, grooming, and living on a limited income.

However, not all meetings dealt with life skills and parenting pressures. The girls also made crafts, prepared foreign foods, and visited the county fair. Formal 4-H meeting structure was abandoned because of the critical ever-changing needs of the participants.

"We Both Count" was born for a variety of reasons: needs were aggressively expressed and confronted; community support was encouraged; the moms and babies in the club learned they were stronger together than apart; and the close communication between staff, club leader, and participants was nurtured and maintained.

JOAN BLUNDALL

*Extension Human Development
Specialist, Iowa State University-
Ames*

BRUCE WILDE

*Extension 4-H & Youth
Leader, Iowa State
University-Ames*