

Significance of 4-H Involvement on the Coping Skills Development in Youth

Josie C. Evenson
Montana State University
jeverson@montana.edu
(406) 433-1206

Carl G. Igo
Montana State University
cigo@montana.edu
(406) 994-3693

Shannon K. Arnold
Montana State University
shannon.arnold@montana.edu
(406) 994-6663

Department of Agricultural & Technology Education
230 Linfield / P.O. Box 172830
Bozeman, MT 59717

Significance of 4-H on the Coping Skills Development in Youth

Introduction

Historically, there has been a lack of resources in rural areas, causing an increased risk for mental health issues (McPherson, 2016). Research concluded that youth, especially rural youth, struggled to cope with everyday problems (Eacott & Frydenberg, 2009). Positive youth development programs provided life skills that assisted youth throughout life (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992). The 4-H program aided youth in the creation of well-being by applying youth development frameworks (USDA 4-H, 2011; Geldhof, Bowers, Boyd, Mueller, Napolitano, Schmid, Lerner & Lerner 2013). Though limited evidence interconnecting life skills and coping skills, Frydenberg and Lewis (2009) concluded the use of coping skills benefited youth and allowed them to form an overall well-being. The PERMA theory developed by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) was introduced to 4-H by McCormick and Boleman (2007) and conveyed that programs needed to focus on the development of positive qualities. Thus, the research question for this project: In what significant ways do planned 4-H experiences affect 4-H members' coping skills? The following objectives guided the study: (1) What coping skills were gained by senior 4-H members through 4-H experiences? (2) How did youth feel about their 4-H experience as it happened and upon post-experience reflection? (3) How did adult supporters of 4-H youth see coping skills developing in the 4-H members?

Framework/Methodology

This qualitative study used grounded theory methodology due to the lack of evidence which supported that 4-H developed coping skills for youth. This approach allowed the theory to be developed and “grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” (Saladana, 2011, p.6). Seligman's P.E.R.M.A. theory was selected for the theoretical framework; P.E.R.M.A., is an acronym created by the elements of the theory: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In addition, Eacott and Frydenberg's definitions of coping were selected for the operational definition. The population sample included eight active youth 14-18 years old and nine adults in attendance at the 2019 Montana 4-H Congress. Data were collected from the youth through multiple structured in-depth interviews while adults participated in one structured focus group interview. Data were coded using open, axial and selective coding (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). During open coding, the generalized responses were coded into productive coping, non-productive coping, and reference to others (Eacott & Frydenberg). In axial coding, all responses were sorted to 18 pre-defined themes. Selective coding provided the basis for the theory of the study. An additional coder randomly selected 10% of the data to code. Through discussion, all discrepancies were resolved resulting in 100% agreement on codes. This study correlated to the National Research Agenda priority 6: Vibrant, Resilient Communities (Roberts, Harder & Brashears, 2016).

Results

With youth participants, 66% of responses were coded as productive coping while 11% were non-productive coping and 12% referenced other people, which could be either productive or non-productive. The most often used coping skill for youth was a *focus on solving the problem* while the second most often used was a *focus on the positive* and the third was *work hard and achieve*. In contrast, among the youth, the most often reported non-productive coping mechanism was *worry* with 71 responses followed by *keep to self* with 11 responses. The adult participants were extension professionals or 4-H volunteer leaders. The questions to which they responded

focused on the coping mechanisms they had observed in 4-H members. Adult responses included 58% coded to productive coping, 5% to non-productive coping and 19% referencing other people. The most often observed productive coping skill was again *focus on solving the problem* with the second being *work hard and achieve*. Non-productive coping mechanisms in 4-H youth, as observed by adults, included *worry* with 16 responses followed by *not cope* and *keep to self* each with two responses.

Conclusions

The grounded theory developed from this research, based on the framework, operational definition and data analysis was: As well-being is achieved through positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment through the 4-H program, youth are able to develop and practice beneficial coping skills. Through the varied experiences within 4-H, members adopted abilities to cope with difficult decisions, difficult people and bad days. Both youth and adult participants recognized the use of productive coping skills; all participants also reported using skills classified as non-productive and reference to others. Youth and adults in this study provided evidence that Montana 4-H benefitted youth with the ability to produce and use positive emotions and thinking during their life, especially when facing challenges. Data revealed that 4-H was at least one way for youth to establish skills leading to positive relationships including friends, 4-H leaders, extension professionals and parents. Youth and adult study participants also revealed the 4-H program journey produced meaning and accomplishment. When involved in a program providing a safe and positive environment, youth are more likely to flourish and have an enhanced well-being.

Implications and Recommendations

In support of previous research (Boyd, Herring, & Briers (1992); Alberts, Christiansen, Chase, Naudeau, Phelps, & Lerner, (2006); Eacott & Frydenberg, 2009), there are positive implications to productive youth coping skills resulting from involvement in 4-H programs. Extension professionals can disseminate the results of this study to parents/guardians of potential and current 4-H members for recruitment, to local school systems to develop 4-H in-school programs, and to current and potential stakeholders to secure support. The results will benefit rural and urban community health partners in building awareness of constructive coping skills developed by youth through 4-H programs. Due to 4-H youth reporting *worry* as a coping mechanism, there is a continued education need for extension professionals, adult volunteers and youth on mental health wellness. Developing a mental health and wellness curriculum within 4-H should be a priority shared between state/national extension professionals and mental health professionals. There is also a need for extension professionals to commit the necessary time toward training adult 4-H program volunteers on recognizing both productive and non-productive coping mechanisms, especially within 4-H youth members.

Additional research is needed to more extensively investigate coping mechanisms developed or promoted through 4-H experiences. Future research should include a larger sample, including all 4-H members regardless of age or involvement in state 4-H events. A longitudinal study of 4-H members is recommended to gather long term data as it relates to the development and use of coping mechanisms, both productive and non-productive, as well as 4-H members who have completed a mental health and wellness curriculum. There is also a need for studies investigating youth coping skills development through organizations beyond 4-H.

References

- Alberts, A. E., Christiansen, E. D., Chase, P., Naudeau, S., Phelps, E. & Lerner, R. M. (2006). Qualitative and quantitative assessments of thriving and contribution in early adolescence: findings from the 4-H study of positive youth development. *Journal of Youth Development, 1*(2), 20-32. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2006.383>
- Boyd, B. L., Herring, D. R., & Briers, G. E. (1992). Developing life skills in youth. *Journal of Extension, 30*(4). <https://www.joe.org/joe/1992winter/a4.php>
- Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006, July). *Qualitative research guidelines project*. <http://www.qualres.org/HomeGrou-3589.html>
- Eacott, C., & Frydenberg, E. (2009). Promoting positive coping skills for rural youth: benefits for at-risk young people. *The Australian Journal of Rural Health, 17*(6). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1584.2009.01109.x>
- Frydenberg, E., & Lewis, R. (2009). Relations among well-being, avoidant coping, and active coping in a large sample of Australian adolescents. *Psychological Reports, 104*(3), 745-758. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.2466/PR0.104.3.745-758>
- Geldhof, G. J., Bowers, E. P., Boyd, M. J., Mueller, M. K., Napolitano, C. M., Schmid, K. L., Lerner, J. V., & Lerner, R.M. (2013). Creation of short and very short measures of the five Cs of positive youth development. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 24*(1), 163-176 <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12039>
- McCormick, M. J. & Boleman, C. T. (2007). Positive psychology and youth development: a new science for a time-honored extension mission. *Journal of Extension, 45*(2). <https://www.joe.org/joe/2007april/tt2.php>
- McPherson, A. C. (2016) *Collaborative community prevention: an ecological approach to mental health support for children in rural America*. Dissertations. 2140. https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/2140
- Roberts, T. G., Harder, A., & Brashears, M. T. (Eds). (2016). American Association for Agricultural Education national research agenda: 2016-2020. Gainesville, FL: Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.
- Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Seligman, M. E. P. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5>
- United States Department of Agriculture, 4-H National Headquarters. (2011, November). *Essential elements fact sheet*. <https://nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resource/Essential%20Elements%20of%204-H%20v.2011.pdf>