

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

Josie C. Evenson, Carl G. Igo, & Shannon K. Arnold

Introduction

- Eacott & Frydenberg (2009) reported rural youth especially struggled to cope with everyday problems.
- Though there is limited evidence connecting life skills to coping skills, Frydenberg & Lewis concluded positive coping skills use resulted in overall well-being in youth.
- PERMA Theory (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) has been used within 4-H programs to aid development of positive life qualities.

Theoretical Framework

PERMA theory was combined with Eacott & Frydenberg's operational definitions for coping to frame and operationalize the research.

P

- **Positive** emotions lead to hope, optimism, and impact personal and professional relationships

E

- **Engagement** allows a sense of flow and immersion in hobbies, recreation, relationships and work

R

- Positive **Relationships** with others reduce depression and increase healthy behaviors

M

- **Meaning** impacts goal setting and achievement while decreasing mortality risks

A

- **Accomplishment** positively impacts self-efficacy and the ability to introspectively and retrospectively assess fulfillment

Methods

- **Research Question:** In what significant ways do planned 4-H experiences affect 4-H member's coping skills?
- **Objectives:** 1) What coping skills were gained by senior 4-H members through their 4-H experiences; 2) How did youth feel about their planned 4-H experience as it happened and retrospectively; 3) How did adult supporters of senior 4-H youth see coping skills developing in the members?
- **Grounded theory methodology**
 - Eight active 14-18 year old 4-H members and nine 4-H-connected adults from multiple counties in Montana;
 - Individual structured in-depth interviews of youth; focus group interview of adults;
 - Open, axial and selective data coding into categories of productive coping, non-productive coping and reference to others.

Results

Coding Category	Definition of Category	Youth Response Percentage	Adult Response Percentage
Productive Coping	"Strategies that work on solving a problem and remaining optimistic, fit, relaxed and socially connected" *	66%	58%
Non-Productive Coping	"Strategies that are largely negative and avoid the problem" *	11%	5%
Reference to Others	"Strategies in which people turn to others for help" *	12%	19%
Other	Any participants' response that didn't fit within the specified categories or themes. Examples: yes, no, don't know, 4-H events etc.	11%	18%

* Eacott & Frydenberg, 2009, p. 340.

Conclusions, Implications & Recommendations

- There is adequate evidence to conclude many of the planned activities through Montana 4-H benefitted youth with the ability to produce and use positive emotions and thinking in their lives.
- Both youth and adult participants recognized the use of productive coping skills; all participants also reported coping mechanisms classified as non-productive and reference to others.

Grounded Theory: As well-being is achieved through positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment within planned 4-H program activities, youth are able to develop and practice productive coping skills.

The research confirms and supports previous studies (*Boyd, Herring, & Briers (1992); Alberts, Christiansen, Chase, Naudeau, Phelps, & Lerner, (2006); Eacott & Frydenberg, (2009)*) focused on productive coping skills development in youth involved in 4-H.

Extension professionals should share the results with parents/guardians of potential 4-H members for recruitment purposes, with local school systems for development of 4-H in-school programs and to current/potential stakeholders for additional support.

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 state and national priority.

Additional research is needed to more extensively investigate coping mechanisms developed or promoted through 4-H experiences. A longitudinal study is recommended to gather data on developing coping mechanisms throughout a members' years in 4-H. A quasi-experimental study to assess coping skill development differences in 4-H members and non 4-H members would help confirm the grounded theory of this study. Finally, there is a need for studies investigating youth coping skills through other youth serving organizations.