

## Strategies to Engage Every Parent

All 4-H clubs, youth groups, and classrooms can benefit greatly by having parents involved and engaged. How can we be successful in engaging parents?

**Focus on parent involvement and engagement.** Set a goal for yourself and/or club to increase parent involvement in the coming year, month or even for your next club meeting. Challenge yourself to spend as much time planning what the club experience will be like for the parents as you do for youth members. Create a positive, upbeat, fun environment where parents want to stay at club meetings and be involved. You'll be surprised the difference just focusing on parental involvement can make in your club.

**Get off to a great start with families.** Parent involvement and engagement is heavily based on relationships, and it takes time and effort to build those relationships. Start the 4-H year with a fun activity that involves all family members and helps parents and youth to interact with each other. Ideas might include: family fun night, field trip, scavenger hunt, movie or pizza night, park gathering, relay games, Saturday morning breakfast get together, or community service project. The best way for parents to get to know each other is by spending time together. Need other ideas? Consider having a parent's meeting or create a welcome letter – an informative and inviting letter that shares the vision for the youth group and an open invitation for involvement by parents and families in the group.

**Make parents feel truly welcome.** Create an environment in your youth group or club setting where both youth and adults feel like they belong. Belonging is one of the essential elements of a positive youth program. Consider having a hospitality host or door greeter at every meeting. Make sure parents are introduced to each other and have seasoned parents sit with new parents during meetings to answer questions. Invite new parents to assist with a task immediately to build the culture that everyone helps at every meeting in some capacity.

**Include parents in the decision-making process.** Parents can be a great resource for 4-H leaders and clubs. Include them in the goal-setting process and planning the club's programs each year. Ask for their advice. Take time to share with parents how much you value their opinions and involvement and how their support helps youth in the learning process.

**Ask parents to help.** Often parents are willing to help but are unaware how they are needed or wanted. Some parents may need a little encouragement, reassurance or more information about what they'll be expected to do in order before they get involved. Find out your parents' interests, passions and who their connections are in the community, to engage and involve them in a way that fits their interests within your club.

**Small group interaction will lead to large group camaraderie.** Breaking your parents into small groups or committees on a regular basis will allow them the time to get to know each other better. Through small groups, everyone is more likely to contribute to the conversation and it allows for deeper interaction with parents. Give some thought to small group parent committees you could form that will increase parent involvement and engagement and will lead to overall large group camaraderie.

**Amp up the FUN!!** Parents just want to have fun! Youth rate FUN as one of the top reasons they want to participate in extracurricular activities and adults are no different. How can you amp up the fun for parents? Ideas might include a chili cook-off or cookie contest where dads serve as judges. Have youth members create a fun PowerPoint about the parents or go to a sporting/community event together as a club. Find a parent within your group that might lead the FUN effort for your club members and parents.

Communicate, communicate, communicate! Good communication is vital to keep parents engaged and involved with what the youth group/club is doing. Parents should always be kept in the loop. When communication is frequent and high quality, involvement will be substantially higher by parents. Watch how parents communicate with their family members and others. Are they texting? Do they utilize Facebook? Would they like a newsletter or phone call? There are multiple ways to communicate to generate enthusiasm and excitement for the parents. Find a communication tool that works best with your group.