



Valuing Diversity: 4-H is for Everyone

Recent census statistics reveal that New Jersey is home to one of the most richly diverse populations in the nation. That does not mean it has a large population of one ethnic group but that it has many groups represented. A recent survey in one suburban school district found over 25 different languages spoken by the children attending. New Jersey 4-H must reflect and value this diversity.

Challenge or Opportunity

The issue of “diversity” is complicated. While some still see it as a problem, an intrusion by others, we in 4-H prefer to see diversity as a valuable opportunity. The wealth of knowledge, experiences, and resources that are available through diversity allows all of our youth in New Jersey to grow, promoting acceptance of each other and recognizing our similarities and differences.

Melting Pot Theory vs. Tossed Salad

Earlier in our history, we believed that all people must assimilate, become “American”, to be successful. According to the Melting Pot Theory, everyone was expected to speak only English and become just like everyone else. Today we recognize that cultural diversity equals strength not weakness. We encourage everyone to contribute to the national culture, yet maintain their own distinct identity. This is the Tossed Salad Theory; each vegetable in the salad is separate and has a distinct taste, yet when put together, each ingredient enhances the flavor of the others. What cannot be forgotten is that we all have many common qualities and that we are the same or very similar to each other in so many ways, in addition to our own unique qualities.

Growing up in a community where people are alike can seem secure, but it also promotes a narrow focus. The more children experience diversity, the more open and accepting they become. All children have the right to experience inclusive education where all are valued and respected regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religious affiliation, socio-economic status, or culture. Inclusive education builds on the ideals of freedom, justice, and human dignity found in such pillars of America as the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

Inclusive Education in 4-H

When young people experience inclusion in their 4-H clubs and programs, they grow individually in their self perception, confidence, and self value. When inclusion is modeled, youth learn how to be inclusive and accepting and are more likely to act inclusively themselves, looking beyond the surface qualities of others to value and respect what lies beneath. Inclusive education is also fully grounded in the essential elements of positive youth development.

- *Mastery of Skills* – Youth are empowered to value themselves and all others.
- *Generosity* – Youth believe in the spirit of inclusion, respecting others.
- *Sense of Belonging* – Youth develop greater interconnection with their 4-H peers and society from the knowledge and understanding of themselves and others.
- *Independence* – Youth view their world through the lens of inclusion, where justice and dignity for all is an assumed right.



Goals of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education:

- Provides opportunities for youth to see all people as equal and value not only those who are like us but also those who may have different qualities.
- Develops mutual respect, acceptance, and understanding.
- Deepens concern and empathy for the needs of others.
- Develops interconnection to others.
- Values cultural differences and affirms the diversity that is in our communities.
- Builds self esteem.

Mini-activities to Promote Inclusion

Below are some activities you may wish to try with your 4-H members to help them learn to value differences.

A “Me” Bag

This activity will prompt members to see similarities and differences they have with other members. Collect newspapers and magazines (for pictures). Give each member a small paper bag that will be a “me” bag. They should select photographs that represent:

- Their family
- What they enjoy doing
- What makes them special and unique

All of these cutout photos should be placed in their “me” bags, which can be decorated with their name and anything else they wish to put on them. In small groups, members should share the contents of their “me” bag.

World Leaders

Use magazines, newspapers, the Internet, and other media to help youth develop an interest in current events. Find pictures and articles of the world’s leaders and other famous people. Play a game by matching names with faces.

People Posters

This activity encourages youth to identify, share and appreciate positive qualities about themselves and others. Together youth trace their body outlines and then write poems, stories, sayings, and draw pictures about themselves on the body picture. They consider things they do well, things they are proud of, and qualities that make them special. Encourage others in the group to contribute to the personal posters.



What's in a Name?

This activity helps everyone get to know each other a little better and can prompt discussion about ethnic heritage or even how first names were chosen. Ask each member in your club to share a story about his or her name. Make this assignment at one meeting for the next so they may go home and talk with parents about their names – first, middle, or last. Ask each person to share the story or history.

Group Yellow Pages

This activity helps everyone to recognize and acknowledge their own skills and those of others. Within the group each person creates a page for the book, identifying the skills that they can share with or teach others, i.e. tutoring, music lessons, carpentry, etc. This can be an ongoing project.

Unique as a Snowflake (for younger members)

This activity helps members realize that each person is unique. Ask the group if they think that everyone is alike. If they say no, ask them to identify some characteristics that make people different. If they say yes, then share with them some examples of what makes us different (see group identity exercise below). Give each person a piece of paper (use as many different colors as possible) and have each create a snowflake. They can do this any way they wish. If they need some assistance, have them try the method of making many folds, cutting notches along the fold, then unfolding the paper.

Group Identity

This activity is designed to help members realize they belong to many groups and to encourage interaction between groups. Have members stand when their group is identified. Use groups that are appropriate for your club. Examples are: gender, race grade in school, area where they live, favorite school subjects, hobbies, hair color, etc. Older members may be asked to share a little information about what it feels like to be a member of that group. Give others the opportunity to ask questions of the group standing up.

Sameness Day

This activity provides youth with the opportunity to understand why diversity is important. Choose a meeting date that everyone will be the same – wear the same clothes, such as jeans and a green tee-shirt, eat the same thing, do the exact same craft, etc. No diversity is allowed for a set period of time. The group processes the experience, considering how they felt, what they liked or didn't like about the experience, and what people's differences add to our lives.

Exploring Your Neighborhood or Community

This activity will help members get acquainted with their own community and what it has to offer them. Give them an assignment for the next meeting to go home and learn about their community. Ask them to draw a map of their block, town, street, or whatever is appropriate. Tell them to have their parents help identify who lives in each house or apartment and what other buildings are in the area, such as a store, library, or school, church. When they share their maps, discuss different ideas of what makes a community and how they could make their own community better. Encourage each member to get to know one more neighbor or one neighbor a little better.



Share this poem with members to help them understand the importance of valuing differences.

If All the Trees Were Oaks

What if all the trees were oaks,
How plain the world would seem;
No maple syrup, banana splits,
And how would orange juice be?

Wouldn't it be a boring place,
If all the people were the same;
Just one color, just one language, just one family name!

-But-

If the forest were the world,
And all the people were the trees;
Palm and pine, bamboo and willow,
Live and grow in harmony.

Aren't you glad, my good friend,
Different though we be;
We are here to help each other,
I learn from you, and you, from me.

Author Unknown

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For more information on New Jersey 4-H, please visit www.nj4h.rutgers.edu.

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