Cultural Awareness is Important

The United States continues to become more diverse, as are the communities and clubs in which we participate. Increasing awareness and acceptance of these changing demographics, however, is not always easy. Parents, 4-H volunteers, teachers, and other adults in children’s lives often want to address these changing demographics, but they may not know the best way to approach the topic of cultural awareness.

It is important to remember that learning about culture is much more than celebrating Black History Month, using an activity about diversity, or highlighting one culture; it is a process to view life from a broadened or different perspective. This process involves learning about your own culture, as well as learning more about other cultures, and ways to be more accepting of other cultures, too. Your guidance will help 4-H members gain a better understanding of the importance of cultural awareness.

What is Culture?

In order to discuss with 4-H members the importance of appreciating cultural differences, one must first have a clear understanding of the various elements of culture. This can be challenging because there are many definitions of culture. Culture is most easily defined as the behavior, values, beliefs and language held by a group of people. Culture, therefore, is more than just race; it consists of ethnicity, race, language, geographic location, religion, lifestyle, age, gender, socio-economic status, family structure, and sexual orientation.

Things that make up a person’s culture can be unique to that generation, or it can be passed down from one generation to the next. Also, it is important to remember that a person might “belong” to several cultures. A person who is Asian, female, a mother and an engineer is a member of very different cultural groups than a person who is Caucasian, male, a teenager and a musician. This accounts for the great diversity in our world, but it also creates some opportunities for people to misunderstand others who are not part of the same culture as their own.

Helping Members Learn About Their Own Culture

It is important for 4-H members to learn about their own culture before they are able to understand the importance of accepting other cultures. Once members recognize they have a unique culture, they are ready to learn and accept the differences of other cultures.

Group activities that help members learn more about themselves and others are a good way to help members learn about their culture. These activities could include something as simple as roll call questions, such as:

• Share a favorite tradition or celebration that your family practices.
• Name one thing that is unique about you.
• Share the menu of a favorite meal in your family.

Other activities might involve more interaction where 4-H members could find the similarities and differences they have with one another. A more in-depth activity would be to have the 4-H members think about the things that make up their OWN culture.

Where did they grow up? Where did their ancestors originate? What language(s) do their family members speak?

Have 4-H members write down or draw pictures of the various components of their OWN culture. Then have them share their “cultures” with a small group or with the whole group if possible.

When introducing culture, 4-H leaders should remember to emphasize both similarities and differences of the cultures. This will create an atmosphere of unity — rather than one of superiority or inferiority. Share with the members that it is the similarities that help us understand one another, and the differences that make us all unique.
Is Our Club Welcoming to All Cultures?

As leaders of 4-H clubs, it is important to think about the environment that is created at your club meetings, events and other activities. A welcoming environment means that everyone is included — regardless of gender, ethnicity, abilities or other personal characteristics. Group members and leaders should work to make the environment welcoming especially to new members. Some things for 4-H leaders to think about:

- Do we have a variety of food choices at events that allow for 4-H members who may have dietary restrictions due to religious beliefs, health concerns, or personal conviction?
- Are there different cultures represented in the music, activities, and food choices that are provided?
- Do we provide a welcoming environment? (i.e. call youth by name, make new members feel comfortable, encourage interaction with all members of the group)
- Do we recognize that although everyone may be from the same community, they may not have the same religious backgrounds, customs or family structure?
- Do we make sure the facilities and activities are accessible to all participants?
- Do we include parents and other adults from various cultures to assist with programs and make certain that materials are appropriate for all cultural groups?

Tips to Bring a Multicultural Perspective to Your 4-H Club:

1. Before learning about other cultures, have each student learn about his or her own heritage, family traditions, and culture. Have each youth share with the rest of the club what he or she has learned.
2. Check out books from your library representing different cultures and languages. Bilingual books are a great resource too.
3. Highlight famous or prominent people of non-European descent and their various contributions (i.e., African, Asian, Latin American).
4. Invite speakers who have traveled or lived outside of the United States to share their experiences.
5. Take a field trip to an ethnic bakery or store—sample what’s there.
6. Have students use a wheelchair for a day to help change their perspectives regarding physical disabilities.
7. Teach 4-H members to use sign language. This not only can help them understand a different culture, but it is also helpful for visual learners.
8. Visit a 4-H member’s family to learn about their culture: learn about the traditional foods they eat, holidays they celebrate and traditions they honor.

Culturally Sensitive Language

One of the necessary components of culturally sensitive programs is appropriate language. This can sometimes be challenging because some terms for different groups of people are continually changing. Also, just because a term is “accepted” as appropriate for a group of people, it does not mean that every individual in the group will find it acceptable. If you are unsure whether you are using appropriate terminology, here are some questions to reflect upon:

- Does the term that I am using value the person? (For example, “people with disabilities” is a more respectful term than “handicapped or disabled people” because it places the emphasis on the person rather than the disability.)
- Does the term that I am using accurately reflect the culture? (For example, Native American is preferable to Indian because it reflects that the Native American people were the first people in this country.)
- Are there people within a culture group that I could contact or could arrange to have speak with our club/group about their experiences as a member of that culture?

It is important to be aware of terminology because using appropriate language can help make the environment more welcoming and inclusive.

It is impossible, however, to always say the right word or phrase. For that reason, the most important point to remember is to respect each individual and ASK if you are not sure of the correct wording/behavior or response. Asking the individual how they would like to be addressed will convey your respect for the person, as well as your willingness to include them as part of the group.

Cultural Diversity Programs

Many resources are available from University of Illinois Extension to assist in promoting cultural understanding in your 4-H club. These resources include lesson plans, curricula, and culture kits, as well as cultural exchanges and international travel opportunities.
Activities to Help Youth Appreciate Culture

Culture Cloth
• Each group member is given a white cloth square (12 inches). They are asked to develop a design for their square that represents something about their personal culture. Their design can be created using words, symbols, pictures or shapes. Aspects of their culture to consider for their design include food preferences, music interests, dance, art, ethnic heritage, family background, holiday practices or religious beliefs.
• Using washable ink, paint or colored cloth, they place their design on their square—leaving about an inch on each side for eventual sewing.
• Once the squares are done, the squares are sewn together into a group “culture cloth.” The cloth can then be quilted with a backing or hung on a rod for display.

Processing questions:
1. Did you learn anything new about other group members?
2. What were some of the unique symbols, words or pictures that group members included on their cloths?
3. Why is it important to learn about other people’s cultures?
4. How can you learn more about other cultures?

Four-of-a-Kind
• The group is divided into groups of four people. Each small group is given a white poster board with the outline of a smaller black frame placed about an inch in from the outside edges of the poster board.
• The group of four identifies through group discussion four ways all four members are alike—searching for similarities that are NOT obvious. They write words or draw things that represent the four similarities in the middle of the black frame.
• They then each identify one way they are different from the other three group members—again looking for differences that are not obvious. Each person writes their first name and their difference on one outside edge of the poster board.
• Each small group then reports to the larger group the similarities and differences they identified in the activity.

Processing questions:
1. Are all the people in this group the same? Are there any similarities within the group?
2. Why is it important to understand how we are different AND similar?
3. How can we celebrate differences in our group while also highlighting similarities?

Spur-of-the-Moment Cultural Sharing
• Have group members sit in a circle to create an atmosphere of openness in your meeting.
• Tell group members we carry bits and pieces of our culture around with us all of the time—how we dress, what belongings we take with us when we go places, and choices we make each day all demonstrate our values and beliefs.
• Ask group members to select one item they have with them at your meeting that tells something about themselves—a favorite T-shirt or other piece of clothing they are wearing, a ring or other piece of jewelry on their person, a photograph in their purse or wallet, a cell phone, a driver’s license or credit card, etc.
• Have each person share with the whole group what the item is and why it is important to them—you may need to ask some probing questions for them to really discover why they have the item on or with them that day.
• Look for values-driven statements made by your members when they share their items with each other—point those out as they surface in your group.

Processing questions:
1. Did you learn anything new about yourself or about other group members?
2. What were some of the categories of items people shared—family, friends, personal interests, likes and dislikes, pets, hobbies, etc.?
3. Was it easy or hard to determine why they had the item with them at the meeting? Why was it easy or hard?
4. Why is it important to respect personal items people have with them when you interact with them?
5. What are other ways you can learn what things are important to other people?

Diversity Mapping

This activity helps group members visualize the richness of diversity that exists among the group’s participants. It also allows for the opening of discussion on ethnicity and culture by focusing on geographic diversity.

Materials needed for this activity include: a large map of the world, a United States map, a map of Illinois and four different colors of self-adhesive paper strips or tape.

Directions:
- Have participants take four different colored self-adhesive paper strips or tape (pink, yellow, green, orange).
- Have participants print his or her name on each self-adhesive paper strip or tape.
- Have participants put these strips of paper to the map on the wall to mark the following places:
  - Pink Indicates where you were born
  - Yellow Indicates where your ancestors came from
  - Green Indicates places that you’ve lived
  - Orange Indicates a place you have a cultural connection with
- After all participants have posted, have them look to see where everyone else’s paper strips were charted.

Processing Questions:
1. What did they learn from this activity?
2. Were you surprised by anything you saw?
3. How did this activity make you feel?

This activity was adapted from The Diversity Toolkit, © Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe.

Diversity resources that may be available through your local Extension office:
- Ingram, P. Diversity activities for youth and adults. Penn State College of Agricultural Services. For more information: http://agexted.cas.psu.edu/FCS/pi/Resources.html
- Morita, Yuri (1998). Take a walk in my shoes: Guidebook for youth on diversity awareness activities. University of California, Office of Affirmative Action, Division of Agricultural and Natural Resources. For more information, contact DANR Affirmative Action Office at 510-987-0085.
  This curriculum was not published by Extension, but it is a juried curriculum.

4-H Project areas to highlight: (these resources are found in the Illinois Clover)
- Family 4-H
- Communications
- Intercultural
- Intergenerational
- Personal Development

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