

# Bridging the Gap between Community Club Environments and Youth Life Skill Development: Adult Volunteers as “Mediators”

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## Introduction

Learning environments that promote positive youth development have notable features. Recent studies have shown that youth spending time in engaging, safe, structured, supervised, and healthy activities, are less likely to become involved in health risk behaviors, as well as attain a variety of competencies and life skills outcomes (Dierking & Faulk, 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Roth et al., 1998). Ideal settings for youth are those that provide (Eccles & Gootman, 2002):

- supportive relationships;
- positive expectations of behavior;
- opportunities for empowerment;
- connections between youth environments (e.g., family, school, & community)
- life skills development.

The purpose of the following report— as part of a statewide evaluation of 4-H clubs across Florida conducted in the summer of 2005\* – is to examine the roles of 4-H organizational support, learning opportunities, and supportive, safe learning environments as they contribute to youth life skill development in community clubs. Most important, the role of volunteers in providing support (attitudes, caring), and creating the settings which motivate life skill development among youth, will be described.

## Methodology

The 4-H club evaluation survey\* was completed by 628 youth from about 30 Florida counties in the summer through fall of 2005. Evaluation reports were produced for individual counties in addition to a statewide report. The evaluation research process began with a factor analysis (principal components with varimax rotation); items fell into a number of expected factors including: (1) volunteer support systems; (2) 4-H organizational support; (3) learning opportunities; and (4) safe, supportive club environments. The goal of this research was to illustrate, through regression analysis, how the above factors fall into a conceptual model. Namely, it was expected that contextual influences (organizational support, learning opportunities, and supportive club environments) influence youth life skills by way of volunteer support systems. In other words, volunteers are believed to mediate or bridge the relation between environmental forces and life skill outcomes.

### Outcome: Life Skills and Youth Development

Life skills gained by youth demonstrate positive youth development and are the outcome measure of interest. Youth reported on the degree to which they possessed the following life skills: *decision-making* (self-responsibility, personal accountability for actions, selecting positive peers, and avoiding risky behaviors), *developing marketable skills* (career choices, planning) *leading and serving others* (community service, leadership skills) and *relationship and communication* (communication skills,

\*More information on the overall evaluation of youth is available in the 2006 Florida 4-H evaluation publication by Joy Jordan and Abbe DeGroat entitled, “Florida 4-H Develops Positive and Productive Youth”.

conflict management skills). (Cronbach's alpha = .94)

#### Volunteer Support Systems: The Bridge Between Club Environments and Life Skills for Youth

The ability of Programs to provide safe and secure environments for youth depends upon the management and quality of trained staff and volunteers. Volunteers not only help maintain safe, secure environments for youth but also provide caring and support as well as ample learning opportunities. Youth overall rated 4-H club volunteers as effective at individual mentoring and support. Items indicating mentoring and support of youth needs included: "listens to me and my club members"; "talks with me or other members when we have a problem"; "lets me know that he/she has high expectations of me"; and "encourages me to take leadership roles and helps me succeed." A significant correlation was found between volunteer support and youth life skills ( $r=.676$ ,  $p<.000$ ). This finding leads us to the next question, "How do the organizational supports, learning opportunities, and supportive environments provided by 4-H contribute to youth life skill development?" (Cronbach's alpha = .96)

#### Contextual Influences: Organizational Supports, Learning Opportunities and Supportive Environments

A question the evaluation survey aimed to answer is how effective 4-H has been at supporting youth in their counties. Items that measured this effectiveness factored into two areas: (1) 4-H organizational supports; and (2) learning opportunities. Items measuring 4-H organizational support include: "4-H is my primary activity outside school"; "In 4-H I feel useful and important"; and "My 4-H Club involves youth from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds" (Cronbach's alpha = .86). Items measuring learning opportunities in 4-H club environments include: "4-H offers projects to meet my interests"; "Project materials I receive help me gain new knowledge and skills"; and "4-H provides me training events to support my project work" (Cronbach's alpha = .81)

Beyond organizational supports and learning opportunities, there must be safe supportive environments created by volunteers working with youth in community clubs. Items measuring safe supportive environments in clubs include: "4-H clubs are supportive environments where I feel accepted"; "My 4-H club provides a safe place for learning and growing"; and "In my 4-H club, I can explore my own interests" (Cronbach's alpha = .82)

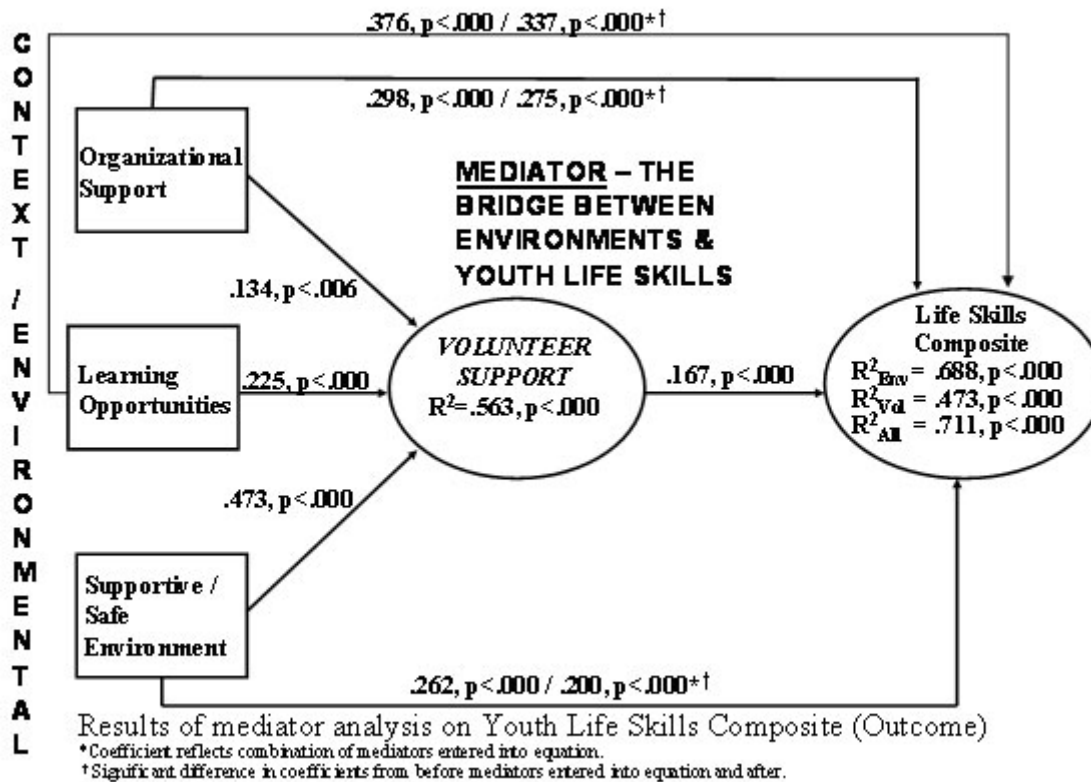
#### Relations among contextual influences, volunteer support systems and life skills

Organizational supports, learning opportunities in the environment, and supportive environments (contextual influences) each correlated significantly with both youth life skills and volunteer support systems. This leads to the questions: (1) what might a model containing life skills, volunteer support systems, organizational supports, and environmental opportunities look like? and (2) how does such a model explain how volunteers and environmental supports work to influence youth development?

Following a factor analysis, the researchers attempted to create a concept map among influences, treating life skills as a positive youth development outcome. A number of combinations of variables were tested using Baron and Kenny's (1986) method for testing mediation with multiple regression. Consistent support was found for volunteer support systems (adult volunteers' attitude and the way they interacted with youth) as a partial mediator of the relation between environmental influences and youth life skill outcomes.

Simply stated, a mediator is an influence that comes between two variables and helps explain how the two variables relate. For example, the relation between poverty and youth school performance can be better explained by the mediator, "parents' involvement in schooling." One cannot assume because a youth is poor, that he or she will automatically do poorly in school. Also, when a mediator (usually a person-based factor) explains the relation between an environmental or contextual factor and a youth development outcome, it helps us know where to intervene (Hansen, 1996)- for example, creating a program that encourages low-income parents to increase their involvement in a child's schooling.

The figure that follows statistically illustrates the relations among the five variables.



## Main Ideas

Although at first glance, the model appears complex, it can be easily summarized.

- About 70% of the life skills outcome (variance in youth life skills) is explained by the three contextual/environmental influences.
  - Almost 50% of life skills are explained by volunteer support.
  - Supportive safe environments, learning opportunities and 4-H organizational support *all* influence youth life skills.
    - Without the presence of volunteers, the environmental influences (safe environments, learning opportunities, and 4-H organizational support) lose impact. In other words, when volunteers are taken out of the equation (for example, the supportive safe environment → life skills path coefficient reduces from .262 to .200), the impact of environmental influences on youth outcomes lessens.
    - It's all about volunteer support. Volunteer support systems mediate or serve as a bridge between environmental influences and youth life skill outcomes. This is because volunteer support is related to each of the environmental influences and related to life skill outcomes.
      - Volunteers support the development of key youth life skills such as: communication skills (conflict resolution, self-confidence, public presentation), relationship skills (making and keeping friends, relationship building skills), decision-making skills (planning, organizing time and resources, setting goals, self-responsibility), and leading and serving others (community service, planning club activities in community, learning leadership).
      - Because volunteers are the key, the 4-H organization as a whole can have the most impact on youth through volunteer development provided by agents and specialists.

## Implications for Extension Programs/Conclusion

Ultimately, volunteers provide support to youth and help create environments of safety, challenging learning, and convey the message of 4-H organizational support and systems to youth.

\*More information on the overall evaluation of youth is available in the 2006 Florida 4-H evaluation publication by Joy Jordan and Abbe DeGroat entitled, "Florida 4-H Develops Positive and Productive Youth".

The research findings reveal no surprises. The best way to positively influence youth life skill development – as well as the community club environment and organizational support – is through supporting and training adult volunteers who work with youth. The research shows that the volunteers who worked with the surveyed 4-H youth were strong in their knowledge of 4-H as an organization, offered challenging learning opportunities for youth, created safe healthy environments for youth in clubs, and supported them through caring, encouraging relationships. The research here simply sums up a well-known truth in 4-H that “volunteers hold the key” to youth development. Also, youth development is represented by the life skills that youth possess – life skills that volunteers and 4-H organizational structures and delivery systems help to develop.

The 2005 statewide club evaluation survey provides supporting data from youth on three focus areas of 4-H program effectiveness – namely:

- Creating high quality community-based learning environments for youth in clubs
- Creating caring adults support systems for youth
- Developing life and career skills through subject-matter topics.

Moreover, the data provided a useful means of conceptually organizing the influence of each of these three areas (and components of these areas) on one another. Keeping the above model in mind, the support and training of adult volunteers should include – and appears to be currently strong in these areas:

- sharing information on 4-H opportunities and supports to both adult volunteers and youth at the county, district, state, and national levels
- opportunities for professional growth in the areas of facilitating youth life skills as well as developing youth and adult subject matter skills
- moral support of volunteers at the county (extension agent, program assistant) and state organizational levels
- support for youth-adult partnerships in the club environment (as well as alternate delivery systems), encouraging growth on both sides
- education on creating/fostering developmentally appropriate (ages and stages), safe, structured environments for youth

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