



4-H Health Officers: A Lifetime of Good Health

Elaine Bowen, Ed.D., WVU Extension Specialist

This initiative builds youth leadership and integrates health education into the existing 4-H community network. It is far-reaching and sustainable for the future. In 2007, approximately 900 youths were selected by their 4-H club members to become a club 4-H Health Officer. County 4-H Officer Training Schools equipped the new leaders with a *4-H Club Health Activity Guide* and practice in using it effectively. Training was conducted at County Officer Training School. Throughout the 4-H club year, health officers highlight the “Health H” through interactive games, challenges, and discovery activities with 4-H club participants.

Additionally, the 20,000 4-H participants use their *4-H Health Planners* to track daily personal health behaviors related to a monthly challenge. Families receive handouts that reinforce health habits and facilitate interaction. Each year, the 4-H Health Initiative focuses on a single health theme. In 2007, the theme was dental health and the 2008 theme is physical activity. Healthy eating is the theme for 2009.

The 2007 program focused on improving these specific behaviors among 4-H youth participants:

1. be aware of personal behaviors and how they impact dental health
2. brush and floss their teeth more frequently and thoroughly
3. choose daily snacks that promote their health and optimal growth
4. know and understand the benefits of being tobacco-free
5. visit a dental professional every six months
6. protect their teeth when they play sports by wearing a mouth guard regularly

These are the behavior changes targeted in the 2008 physical activity theme:

1. be active at least 60 minutes a day
2. set and reach personal physical activity goals
3. eliminate individual barriers to physical activity
4. limit screen time
5. balance calorie intake and expenditures
6. wear protective gear such as a helmet
7. drink water every day
8. explore physical activities they like and can do

The 2009 healthy eating theme will focus on these behaviors:

1. understand your “food personality”
2. identify all the influences around you that shape your food choices and behaviors
3. be aware of physical hunger clues
4. track the moods that trigger eating
5. know the right-size portions you need
6. choose healthy fast foods
7. be media smart
8. create a healthy eating environment at home and school
9. set personal goals to achieve healthier eating habits

The premise of the 4-H Health Officer approach to addressing critical issues is that an educational intervention can effectively influence health outcomes for 4-H youths within their social and home environments.

Contact for more information: Dr. Elaine Bowen 304-293-2796 ext. 3626 EPBowen@mail.wvu.edu