Promoting Social Support and Positive Youth Connection

Promoting social support and positive social connections for youth—always a priority for Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs—is extremely important in circumstances that contribute to social isolation. Due to the COVID-19 emergency, youth are currently disconnected from important spaces (school, work, youth organizations) where they rely on and maintain social relationships with peers and adults, receive support, and learn and grow.

4-H has created virtual spaces where youth can connect and learn together, with staff supporting youth and volunteers in safe online practices. Staff train and practice with volunteers to deliver effective distance education. Examples are widespread across Wisconsin—from a Wood County youth-led Lego group to Dane County 4-H youth leaders practicing with staff before leading an on-line education program for other members as part of their small animal’s project meeting.

PYD staff have also helped coordinate pen pal relationships for elementary aged members missing out on day camps, and opportunities for older youth to read to young children via Zoom. The reading activity connects youth across ages, promotes literacy and allowed youth leaders to rediscover some well-loved books from their past.

Graduate Recognition

PYD programs build lifelong connections between youth and adult community members. Sharing and celebrating youth accomplishments is important to us. To recognize graduating 4-H club members and Teen Court Panelists in Buffalo County, PYD Educator Annie Lisowski and colleagues developed senior profiles and shared them individually on social media. The posts reached hundreds of stakeholders, communicating the value of individual 4-H experiences for young people in our community. The survey used to develop the profiles also served as an evaluation tool illustrating the impact 4-H had on long-standing members.

Pen Pal Programs

With 4-H events canceled because of COVID-19, 4-H educators across the state are working to deliver programming online and help youth stay connected. One way educators are helping youth connect with each other is pen pal programs. Educators in several counties have started programs so youth can meet new friends, all while practicing their writing skills.

Educators Sarah Weier (Iowa County) and Carlea Liermann (Calumet County) teamed up to start a pen pal program for youth in their area. Iowa County’s program is for Kindergarten - 2nd grade 4-H members and Calumet County’s program is for 3rd-12th grade 4-H members. Sarah and Carlea matched pen pals after the enrollment period ended in early May.

In Columbia and Green Counties, about 40 youth are writing letters to one another through a pen pal program. Educators Ellen Andrews (Green County) and Pat Wagner (Columbia County) asked participating youth to try to write letters once a week, suggesting

“Ross has been in correspondence with his pen pal. They have written a couple of times. He seems to enjoy getting the letters. I think this is a good program.” - Angela Rhode, Ross’s mom

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Katherine, Pen Pal Participant
they ask their pal about their interests and experiences in 4-H. “Our intent of the program was to provide an opportunity to learn and engage with another person that didn’t involve additional screen time and was accessible for all of our members, whether or not they had internet access,” says Andrews.

Families are excited about the program, many saying it’s helping their children stay socially connected.

Wood County Lego Club

Lego Club is another way 4-H staff are providing virtual programming to youth across the state. Elliot Huber, member of Wood County 4-H’s Teen Leadership Group, leads The Lego Club. Huber created the group, which is open to youth in kindergarten through 13th grade, no matter their 4-H membership status. Lego Club meets every Sunday afternoon for 30-45 minutes via Zoom.

Each week, Huber gives the group a building challenge. Participants then spend the week between meetings to build a creation that meets the challenge requirements. When they come together, everyone shares their builds, asks questions and celebrate each other’s creations.

Laura Huber, Wood County 4-H Program Educator says the youth are excited to share what they’ve built each week. “It’s been wonderful to watch young people connect with one another and challenge themselves to present. In the first weeks, several young people refused to speak and asked a parent or older sibling to share their builds,” says Huber. “Thanks to a safe and supportive environment combined with a shared love of Lego, every young person is now speaking independently.”

Social support from adults and peers is an important factor leading to positive youth development and 4-H provides that support. Even in times when youth cannot meet in person, 4-H continues to find opportunities for youth to feel supported, engaged and challenged.

“Wood County Lego Club is a great way for kids to express themselves creatively and socialize with other kids,” says Huber.

Kindergarten through 3rd grade 4-H members in Manitowoc, Lincoln, Langlade, Wood, and Waupaca Counties are participating in the 4-H Flat Stanley Pen Pal Program. Wood County 4-H Program Educator Laura Huber worked with other Extension educators to pair youth with someone in a similar grade level. Participants received a Flat Stanley or Stella and a journal.

Educators asked them to decorate their Flat Stanley/Stella, write in their journal, and then send it to their pen pal. The pen pal keeps the Flat Stanley/Stella and the journal for a week before returning it to the owner. Educators hosted an initial Zoom meeting for the pen pals and read a few chapters of the Flat Stanley book. Another Zoom will be held where they can see each other again and share about the adventures their Flat Stanley/Stella had at their pen pal’s home.

My two daughters (5th grade and 3rd grade) are participating in this program. They are really enjoying the experience...The messages have been weekly for both girls. They generally respond to the letters almost as soon as they’re received, and it seems to be reciprocal. I think they’ve benefited from this project by perfecting their letter writing skills, becoming more thoughtful and considerate of others’ situations, and generally by just making a new friend from the experience." – Jody, Mom of program participants

Carson M., Pen Pal Participant