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## **State 4-H Leader's Perceptions of Involvement of Youth with Special Needs in the 4-H Program**

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**Abstract:** Estimates indicate that 13% of school age children have a disability. With such a large number of children identified as individuals with special needs, it is important that organizations such as 4-H have strategies in place to work effectively with this population. This study sought to understand how Extension programs across the nation are working with children with special needs. Overall, 86% of respondents were unsure how many children with special needs were being served in their programs and only 44.7% of respondents indicated they provide training for agents and volunteers. While 68% of respondents indicated that there were programs in place, the scope and size of these opportunities varied greatly. Almost 95% of respondents indicated that modifications/accommodations were in place for children with special needs. The researchers suggest a more standardized response to identify and support children with special needs to ensure that effective programming can be developed.

### Introduction/Conceptual Framework

4-H is one of the largest youth organizations in the country with over six million members (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2009). With such a large number of children served, it is not surprising that recent trends indicate a greater variety of youth are participating in the program. Over one million children enrolled in the 4-H program are identified as being non-white in ethnicity (USDA, 2003) and almost two million members are now living in large cities and suburbs (USDA, 2009). Over time, the make-up of 4-H has changed. One trend that has been continuously increasing is the inclusion of children with disabilities in 4-H programs.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) a "disability" is defined as having hearing impairment or deafness, visual impairments, speech or language impairments, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, specific learning disabilities, serious emotional disturbances or other health impairments (United States Department of Education

[USDE], 2007). The term disability is often used interchangeably with terms such as "special needs" and "differently abled." These terms are used to identify a large group of approximately 5.5 million children in the United States. Some estimates say that this number accounts for as many as 13% of school age children (USDE, 2010). With such a large number of children being identified as individuals with a disability, it is important that organizations such as 4-H and FFA have strategies in place to work effectively with this population and provide them with the programs they need in order to be successful members of society.

Extracurricular activities are especially important to children with disabilities to allow them to improve their quality of life, become a part of the community, make friends and develop life skills to make them more successful in their careers (Kleinert, Miracle & Sheppard-Jones, 2007). Students with more severe disabilities are often involved in solitary activities that provide them with little opportunity to interact with others (Strand & Kreiner, 2005). Wagner, Carwallander, Garzer and Cometo (2004) found that only 33% of students with more severe disabilities such as mental retardation have participated in any school extracurricular activities and only 41% participated in community activities. Additionally, skills learned through 4-H programs can improve children's well being. Participation in vocational activities such as caring for animals can help fulfill the need for specific career related skill training for children with special needs interested in working in an agricultural related career (Randolph, 1988).

Because of the many options available within the organization, 4-H can provide students with a unique opportunity to find a program where they can be successful (Stumpf, Henderson, Luken, Bialeschki, Casey, 2002). A study by Kleinert, Miracle and Sheppard-Jones (2007) found that 12% of special education directors in one state had at least one student enrolled in a 4-H program. One challenge to understanding the specific needs of diverse learners in programs is that there is currently little data that allow us to understand how many children with special needs are actually involved in Extension programs. This makes it difficult to determine what level of programs and support systems are needed at various levels.

There are also several perceived barriers to including these children in Extension programs. According to "Building Community Inclusion Programs: A Report of Promising Practices" (2006), there were several challenges to creating inclusive programs. Establishing community collaborations, accessing disability information or adaptive curricula, training staff and volunteers and receiving adequate funding for implementing programs are all challenges that may need to be overcome before successful inclusion is possible. Adequate training can be especially challenging because many agents and volunteers have not had formal training to work with the unique challenges that can occur with students with special needs. Ingram (1999) found that Extension personnel agree with the importance of having program in place that can benefit physically and mentally challenged individuals. Despite the importance of involving these learners, only 33.9% of Extension agents in West Virginia, for example, have had training related to working with children with special needs (Boone, Boone, Reed, Woloshuk, & Gartin, 2006).

While programs are sometimes created on a local or state level, there has been little research about what programs, trainings and accommodations are currently being used on a national level. There is also little consensus on how these children are counted, identified and included in 4-H programming. Legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) requires that organizations accommodate people with disabilities and that no one be denied an opportunity or be discriminated against based on their disability. Therefore, a greater understanding of the needs of children in Extension programs is warranted to ensure we are involving children to the

greatest extent possible. A deeper understanding of national trends will also allow state leaders and Extension agents to provide adequate training for agents and volunteers who will work with these children.

### **Purpose/Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to better understand what practices are currently being used in Extension to work with children with disabilities. Additionally, this study sought to identify national inclusion trends and to better understand how states use data collection, training, programming and accommodations to work with children with special needs. Specifically, this study had five main objectives:

1. To determine how many students with disabilities are being served in Extension programs
2. To identify what methods are in place to identify children with disabilities in Extension programming
3. To determine what programs are currently being used on a state level to support children with disabilities
4. To identify training opportunities for agents, volunteers and leaders in 4-H Extension programs across the nation
5. To identify the current systems for providing modifications and accommodations to 4-H members

### **Methods/Procedures**

Descriptive research was used to better understand what programs and accommodations are being used by each state. The study used an electronic survey instrument that was designed and distributed through SurveyMonkey.com to collect data. State 4-H Program Directors from every state were contacted by e-mail through the national 4-H leaders listserv and informed of the study (N = 50). Following Dillman's survey procedures, participants were contacted initially by e-mail to inform them about the study. One week later a second e-mail was sent with a link to the survey instrument. Respondents were sent reminder and follow-up mailings. After three weeks, non-respondents were contacted by phone and asked to complete the survey. Thirty-eight state leaders completed the survey instrument for a total response rate of 76%.

The instrument consisted of 11 questions. The first three questions asked leaders to identify their state, list how many members are served in their state and specify how many of those members are individuals with special needs. The remaining questions asked members if they use specific programs in their state. The questions were as follows: "Does your state have a system in place for identifying and/or tracking individuals with special needs in 4-H and extension programs?" "Does your state have programs in place to help serve children with special needs?" "Does your state offer training for leaders or volunteers on how to work with individuals with special needs?" "Does your state offer modifications or accommodations for individuals with special needs?" If the respondent answered "yes," then they were asked to describe their program. If they answered "no" or "I am not sure," then the survey skipped to the next question.

Data were collected online and then analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Responses were grouped based on participant response and similar answers were combined for analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each question including frequencies and percentages for each response.

## Results/Findings

### 4-H Enrollment

Of the thirty-eight states that completed the survey, total enrollment of members varied from 2000 to 320,000 (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
4-H Enrollment

Enrollment Numbers	Number of States	Percentage
0 - 99,999	18	47.4%
100,000 - 199,999	13	34.3%
200,000 -299,999	5	13.1%
Over 300,000	2	5.2%

When asked to identify the approximate number of 4-H members with special needs the majority of respondents (86.8%) were either unsure, did not track that information, guessed or left the question blank (see Table 2). Of the five respondents that provided an actual number, the number of individuals with disabilities enrolled in 4-H ranged from 18 in one small state to 6,000 in a larger state.

**Table 2**  
Number of Children with Special Needs Enrolled in the state's Extension Program

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage
Unsure / no idea	14	36.8%
Not tracked	5	13.2%
Actual number	5	13.2%
Guess	7	18.4%
Unanswered	7	18.4%

### Identification of Individuals with Special Needs

Only five states reported that they had a system in place for identifying and/or tracking individual with special needs in 4-H and Extension programs. Two were unsure and the remaining 31 (84.2%) indicated that no system was in place in their state. Those reporting a system in place indicated that members either self-identified themselves as having a disability or parents self-reported the child's disability on the annual membership enrollment forms.

### Programs to Serve Youth with Special Needs

When asked if their state had programs in place to help serve children with special needs, the majority (68.4%) said *yes*. Nine states (26.3%) indicated that there were no programs in place and three, states were unsure or did not respond. The types of programs that were available for youth with special needs varied with some states engaging in more than one type of program. Fifteen states (39.4%) generalized accommodations into all 4-H/Extension programs available. Eight states (10.5%) reported therapeutic riding programs. Other states reported livestock programs for youth with special needs including showing opportunities and working with youth in school programs or school enrichment programs. Thirteen states did not answer, indicating they did not have programs that accommodated individuals with special needs or they were unsure if they had programs (See Table 3).

**Table 3**  
Types of Programs Involving Youth with Special Needs

Types of Programs	Number of States	Percentage
Specified Program		
Generalized accommodation into all programs	15	39.4%
Therapeutic Riding Program	8	10.5%
School Programs	3	7.9%
Livestock Programs	3	7.9%
Special Camping Programs	1	2.6%
Fair Exhibition Programs	1	2.6%
School Gardening Programs	1	2.6%
Special Needs Philanthropy Camp	1	2.6%
"Seeds to Success"	1	2.6%
Unanswered	13	34.2%

### Training options for leaders / volunteers

Training for leaders and/or volunteers was offered by 17 (44.7%) of the responding states. Eighteen states (47.4%) do not offer training to leaders on how to work with individuals with special needs. Three states did not respond. The types of training provided varied greatly (see Table 4). Although some states provided multiple training options to reach leaders and volunteers, the majority (52.6%) did not respond to this question. Providing basic awareness and accommodation training was the most frequent training option, followed by ADA compliance training. Training was most likely to be a part of annual training or 4-H agent training and occurred most frequently at the county or local level.

**Table 4**

## Types of Training Options for Agents/Volunteer Leaders

Type of Training	Number of States	Percentage
Basic Awareness and accommodation training	6	15.8%
Part of Annual Training	4	10.5%
ADA compliance training	4	10.5%
Part of 4-H training	4	11.9%
Factsheets, publications or curriculum provided	2	5.3%
Part of new agent training	2	5.3%
Done at the county level	2	5.3%
Identification of children with special needs	1	2.6%
Done at the state level	1	2.6%
Working with Autistic children training	1	2.6%
Unanswered	20	52.6%

**Modifications and accommodations**

Almost all states (94.7%) indicated that they offer modifications or accommodations for individuals with special needs. Two states indicated they were not sure if they made any modifications or accommodations. Some states reported using multiple modifications to accommodate individuals with special needs. The two most common approaches were to modify the program to accommodate the individual (57.9%) or that modifications were made on a case-by case basis (31.6%) (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

## Types of Modifications and Accommodations

<b>Accommodation</b>	<b>Number of States</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Specified Training		
Program is modified to accommodate the individual	22	57.9%
Done on a case-by case basis	12	31.6%
Work with University personnel and resources	6	15.8%
Self-identification	4	10.5%
Work with state Affirmative Action/ADA office	4	10.5%
Additional program staff is allotted	2	5.3%
Additional funding is provided	1	2.6%
Unanswered	3	7.9%

**Conclusions/Recommendation/Implications****Enrollment**

Enrollment in the 4-H program varied by state with 47.4% (18) of the states having an enrollment of less than 100,000. Only two states had an enrollment of over 300,000. However, an overwhelmingly majority of the states (86.8%) did not track, were unsure, guessed or did not respond to the question regarding the number of individuals with special needs enrolled in their program. Only five states (13.2%) had a tracking system in place for identifying individuals with special needs and were able to provide an actual number. In those instances, members either self-identified themselves as having a disability or the parents self-reported on the annual membership enrollment form. The number of individuals with special needs ranged from 18 to 6000. Identification of individuals with special needs is a crucial first step for developing successful programs that are inclusive. Because there is not already a process in place in many states, it may be important to try to determine how a system could be incorporated into state programs. A standardized system, compliant with ADA/EEO policies, could be developed that would enable each state to identify individuals with special needs, thus allowing opportunities for greater inclusion by developing or adapting programs to meet identified needs. Tracking these students throughout the 4-H program may also allow for the creation of developmental and age appropriate materials. In a statewide survey of special education teachers, results indicated that elementary age children with disabilities were more likely to participate in 4-H than their middle or high school counterparts (Kleinert, et al., 2007). This indicates an opportunity to begin working with student early in their 4-H Experience and possibly keep them involved to a greater extent later on, especially if means are available to follow these students throughout their 4-H experience.

**Programs**

Slightly more than two thirds (68.4%) of the states reported having programs in place to help serve individuals with special needs. A variety of programming efforts were provided, including



therapeutic riding and working with special education classrooms. The most common approach however, was to generalize accommodations into all 4-H/extension programs. In other words, most states worked on a case-by-case basis to adapt or modify programs to fit an individual's needs. States are required by law to be in compliance with ADA/EEO policies and guidelines but without specific guidelines in place, it is difficult to determine if programs are actually being modified for individuals. Developing specific opportunities may allow states to recruit a wider variety of children. Additionally, it may be difficult to market 4-H to individuals who have a disability if no programs are in place that can accurately meet their needs.

Research conducted by Ingram indicated that 52.8% of agents in one state agreed that 4-H programs should make it a priority to recruit individuals from different backgrounds, however, several concerns were listed as reasons why these efforts may not be feasible (1999). States that have been successful in actively including individuals with special needs should be used as models. There may also be a need to create additional promotion and marketing strategies to determine if all audiences are being reached. Focus groups and other data collections methods can be utilized to determine awareness of 4-H/extension programs and accommodation needs of individuals with special needs.

### **Training**

Less than half (44.7%) of the states reported that training was provided for agents/volunteers in working with special needs populations. These results are similar to a 2006 study that found that over half of West Virginia Extension agents had experience working with children with special needs yet only about one-third had experienced training to work with these children (Boone, Boone, Reed, Woloshuk & Gartin, 2006). Despite the fact that training may not be readily available, 2004 4-H Professional Research and Knowledge base (4-HPRK) identifies knowledge of special education as a competency required for youth development professionals. While public school teachers are required to have training in working with youth with special needs including developing Individual Education Plans (IEP's), there may be very little training available for Extension professionals. By law, Extension programs, public schools and other government entities must be compliant with ADA/EEO policies. Being aware of different disabilities and being able to develop appropriate modifications are essential skills for agents, parents and volunteer leaders. Equally important is having the right attitude. Limited experiences or the unknown can sometimes make people uncomfortable in working with special needs populations. Based on programs that have incorporated inclusive training for children with special needs, they have identified training as a key practice to success (National 4-H Council, 2006). Understanding current levels of knowledge and skills of agents and volunteers and comparing them to a desired standard is a necessary step to designing effective training programs.

Although training varied by state, the most common training method given for agents and professional staff was awareness and accommodation training and ADA compliance. This was most often done through state in-service training or new agent training. Some agents may however need a more extensive background than what can be provided in a basic ADA compliance workshop. The most common support for volunteers was to provide factsheets, publications or curriculum materials. Extension could benefit from the development of standardized training materials (beyond ADA compliance) that every administrator and agent should experience. Trained agents could be responsible for directly working and training volunteer leaders in their communities. Supplemental materials for working with parents and volunteers should also be available. A higher level of special education training may require an additional amount of sensitivity/awareness training programs, such as the "Winning 4-H" plan,

have successfully combines sensitivity training and special education to help promote a deeper understanding of disabilities (Goble & Eyre, 2009).

### **Modifications and Accommodations**

On a positive note, 94.7% of the respondents indicated that they offer modifications or accommodations for individuals with special needs. The most common approach was to modify the program to accommodate the individual. For example, one state indicated that members participated in contests and activities based on developmental age and not chronological age. In other instances, modifications were made on a case-by-case basis. An essential element to successful program planning is being able to identify your audience and it may be critical to programs to have some systematic means of identifying audiences with special needs. Once identified, staff needs the skills and competencies necessary to work with this audience. One of those competencies is being able to modify programs/situations to accommodate the special needs. Some modifications may require policy or procedural changes and input from the community, advisory boards, etc. will be important to ensure that everyone is being treated fairly and that changes are perceived to be equitable. Safety would also need to be a primary consideration and there must be realistic expectations that in some programs or activities modifications cannot be made that would ensure a safe environment. For complete inclusion states and counties would possibly need to review existing policies or create new ones that support an inclusive environment. For inclusion to become a priority and not just a milestone within 4-H, staff must be trained in skills that are critical for working with a diverse group of children and adequate materials must be developed and accessible to all (Stumpf, Henderson, Luken, Bialeschki, Casey, 2002).

For further research, it is recommended that studies be conducted on a national level to better understand the barriers and limitations to involving youth with disabilities in 4-H. While there have been studies conducted on a state by state basis that identified the opinions of agents regarding inclusion (Boone, et.al, 2006; Hobbs, 1999; Ingram, 1999), there have been relatively few studies that determine how to incorporate trainings and programs for individuals with disabilities. A greater understanding of how these programs can be implemented may allow Extensions agents to better design more effective programming for inclusion. If research can identify programs that are successfully incorporating students with special needs, then other programs can model those efforts. However, to make 4-H more inclusive a significant amount of planning and evaluation must be conducted so that there can be an understanding of what needs to be done. It is also recommended that research be conducted to determine exactly what level agents and volunteers are being trained to work with this population and what skills they will need to be able to successfully support inclusion.

The programs available through 4-H make it an ideal environment to support many different children. Because the 4-H program provides a wide variety of opportunities, it has the potential to be a very positive environment for children with disabilities. However, in order to provide adequate support for these individuals, there must be a better understanding of the actual number of children that need support, what types of needs they have and what resources leaders and volunteers need in order to be successful. A more standardized approach to tracking, programming and training can potentially allow the organization to be more diverse in its approach as well as more inclusive in its practices. This is not only an important issue for 4-H but is an ongoing concern for other youth organizations as well. Many Career and Technical Education programs have youth organizations that can support students on both an educational and a social level. Future Business Leaders of America, Health Occupations Student Associations and the Family Career and Community Leaders of America are just a few of the organizations

available to students throughout the United States. Because these organizations are often led by teachers, they may need additional resources to help students with disabilities take an active role within the organization. Greenan (2001) suggested that changes in attitude, preparing general education and special education personnel, providing funding and having interagency cooperation agreements are all necessary to help these programs and their youth organizations become successful at inclusion. However, of the extracurricular activities that students with special needs may participate in, only 43% are school activities. In one study conducted by Kleinert, Miracle & Sheppard-Jones (2007) it was reported that these children are participating in choir, school sports, and community activities including church groups, community sports and community groups. Community organization leaders may have even less preparation than individuals who are involved in the school systems and therefore may need access to professional development and activities to help them be successful. Other organizations should also try to determine what impact special education may be having on their leaders and their organizations. Because relatively little research has been within these areas, other clubs, sports teams and organizations should seek to determine how inclusion is being handled within their organization and how leaders are currently addressing these needs.

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