

It's the hard work that fosters responsibility in teen programs

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Millions of American teenagers participate in Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H, and other programs designed to develop responsibility in young people. A new study suggests that it's not the fun and games of these programs, but the tough tasks—those that ask young people to make sacrifices and do difficult things for the good of the group—that are most likely to foster responsibility and self-discipline.

The study, conducted by researchers at Wake Forest University and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, appears in the January/February 2009 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers surveyed more than 100 high schoolers who took part in 11 different summer and after-school programs. Many teens spontaneously reported that developing responsibility was a goal of their participation in the program. They said they achieved this goal by having important official roles, investing time, and being committed to the adults and other youths in the program.

These young people also said the program helped them develop responsibility by asking them to carry out demanding tasks, from caring for pigs in an FFA agricultural program to forgoing time with friends to attend rehearsals of a school play. Programs that were deemed most successful in increasing teens' responsibility were those that gave young people ownership for their ideas, were highly structured, held teens accountable for their work, and expected a lot of the participants.

"Although the teenagers we interviewed generally enjoyed their program experiences overall, it is the programs in which young people are called to perform tasks that are boring, difficult, or obligatory that are most likely to help them develop characteristics like responsibility and self-discipline," according to Dustin Wood, assistant professor of psychology at Wake Forest University, who led the study.

Reference: *Child Development*, Vol. 80, Issue 1, How Adolescents Come to See Themselves as More Responsible Through Participation in Youth Programs by Wood, D (Wake Forest University), Larson, RW, and Brown, JR (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign).

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