

4-H Youth Development Addresses Protective Risk Factors 5/5/09
Lauren Healey, 4-H Youth Development Agent

According to a recent article published by Helping America's Youth, youth are exposed to a variety of factors which can increase their risk for, or protect them from societal problems such as drug abuse or being involved in delinquent behavior. "Risk factors" are situations that may increase youth's chances of engaging in risky behavior, while "protective factors" are those circumstances that promote healthy youth behaviors and decrease the chance youth will engage in risky behaviors. Oconee County is blessed with a great variety of youth development opportunities, one I am very familiar with, is the 4-H program.

The 4-H Youth Development Program in Oconee County offers a variety of learning opportunities that address protective factors. When protective factors are present they serve to provide a cushion against the negative effects of risk factors, may interrupt the risk factor and lead the teen in a positive direction or may prevent the negative behavior from occurring at all.

One protective factor 4-H offers is the opportunity for youth to be involved in an extracurricular activity and 4-H is available during the school year and throughout the summer. 4-H also provides a well-organized and safe environment.

Through six judging teams, three quiz bowl teams and our project achievement process, 4-H addresses four of the positive risk factors. These competitions give students a sense of purpose for their future with a healthy sense of self and personal power to achieve through motivation. 4-H awards students who not only excel, but also those who participate which helps with the protective factor of reinforcement of good performance.

Teen leadership is a very important part of 4-H and research indicates that positive peer models is important in decreasing negative risk factors. Our teen leadership opportunities include serving as a club officer, attending 4-H camp at Rock Eagle, helping with afterschool activities, and teaching summer classes.

Four of the protective risk factors are targeted through 4-H community service activities. 4-H offers incentives for community service and volunteerism. This provides youth with meaningful ways to participate in community activities. The largest community service projects in our county involve collecting pop tops for Ronald McDonald House Charities, adopt a mile, cooking meals for local foster families, painting butterflies for Butterfly Dream Farms, and raising money to help with Duchennes Muscular Dystrophy.

So, you can see that the 4-H Youth Development program in Oconee County is helping youth to become contributing members of society who are less likely to become involved in risky behaviors.

For more information about the 4-H program or other youth development issues, contact the Oconee County Cooperative Extension Office at (706) 769-3946 or stop by our office located behind the Oconee County Courthouse.