Service-Learning

From roadside trash pick-up to collecting food for the needy, many 4-H members are actively engaged in community service projects as a part of their club experience. But, are they involved in service-learning? What is the difference? How can we turn a community service project into service-learning?

Service-learning is a way of teaching youth which promotes deeper learning. It combines meaningful community service with learning and reflection to enrich the experience. Here’s an example: If youth remove trash from the roadside, they are providing a service to the community. That’s community service. For service-learning, additional learning and reflection opportunities are incorporated. Ideas might include: youth learn about safety (wearing vests, gloves) from a guest speaker, or watch a DVD on roadside pick-up before the event. During trash pick-up, youth reflect and analyze what they found. After the project, youth reflect on the experience, share the results with other community groups and offer suggestions how to reduce litter in the future. That’s service-learning!

Discovering the learning potential of your community project can be very exciting and motivating for youth and adults. From service-learning projects, youth build positive relationships, develop leadership skills, learn decision-making, problem solving, teamwork, and empathy for others. Service-learning also promotes a lifelong commitment to public service and learning. Kicking up your community service projects a notch into service-learning will increase the learning potential for youth and make it an experience they won’t forget! Your current community service projects may already have some of the following important elements of service learning:

**Give youth a voice in planning.** Are youth involved in the planning of the project? Is the project being led by youth? Do they have a personal interest in the project? Engaging youth in the process will provide more ownership and greater learning opportunities. Youth input, leadership, and decision-making will aid in the success of a service-learning experience.

**Fill a community need.** Does the project address a real need in the community and is positive, meaningful and real? Need ideas? Have youth write down activities/community events/hobbies that are of interest to them. Figure out a service-learning project for each. (Do they like to ride bikes? Have a bicycle repair day for less fortunate youth in the community). For older youth, research online for issues in the community or discuss needs for their school.

**Youth learn from the project.** Planning for what is to be learned through the experience is an important component and should be clearly identified. What are the
learning objectives? Will participants need additional training or an orientation for this project? (For example, if youth will serve food for the homeless, what food safety measures do they need to be aware of?) Listen for teachable moments throughout the service-learning project. You’ll be surprised at the number of unplanned lessons learned!

Reflect on the experience. Reflection should occur before, during and after the experience and is the key to service-learning. Incorporate fun reflection activities to promote lively discussions. Ideas: pass a beach ball to each other, when you catch it, you share something about the experience. Create posters about the experience or make a digital photo story to share with parents or community groups.

Reflection gives youth time to consider what they learned, share their ideas and feelings with others, and how they can use the experience in other areas of their lives. Use the following format to assist in the reflection process:

- **What?** (Do) Discuss the experience. What did you do? Tell me about your favorite part of the project. How did the experience make you feel? What were some of the unexpected things that happened?
- **So what?** (Reflect) Interpret the experience. What did the service project mean to you? Why was it important? What was the most challenging part of the experience? What did you learn from this project that you didn’t know before?
- **Now What?** (Apply) Explore the possibilities for change. What will I do with what I have learned? How can I use the skills to meet other community needs? What should our next project be?

Celebrate a job well done! Youth should always be recognized and celebrated for providing service to the community. A celebration can bring closure to the experience and help youth look forward to their next project.