



Statewide Autism and Resources Training (START)



Increasing Inclusion Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities through the Michigan 4-H Youth Development Program



4-H The Power of Inclusion

Overview

According to the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education (MDE OSE), there are over 217,000 students in Michigan with some form of disability. This includes a reported 27,582 with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or 12.7 percent of the disability population, who are eligible for special education services between the ages of 2-26 years. Examples of other intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) receiving services through Michigan public education include those with cognitive (intellectual) impairment (16,749), specific learning disabilities (55,325), speech and language impairment (60,048), and other areas which includes students with multiple intellectual, developmental, or physical disabilities (MDE, 2023-2024). Many youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including autism, seek options for inclusive social engagement opportunities. The Michigan 4-H Youth Development Program (YDP) may inherently provide opportunities for social connectedness rooted in shared areas of interest for youth with a disability and neurotypical (NT) peers.

The [Institute on Community Integration](#) at the University of Minnesota conveys inclusion is more than being present in a given community, but involves persons with IDD being included in all aspects of community life including school, work, recreation, worship, and contribute based on talents and value in the community and belong to the community and not the “system”. Inclusion is vital for individuals with disabilities in achieving **overall quality of life and can impact integration to the community, social relationships, and skill acquisition** (Hall, 2017). Zurawski (2015) describes the camaraderie and deep bond that often develops, as described by both disabled and non-disabled peers and may be cultivated from interests of the club or sharing a sense of connectedness with the group.

While the benefits of inclusion for youth with disabilities is well researched, there is mutual benefit to the youth in the peer role. Participation in such opportunities can improve leadership skills, promote understanding of making and following through on commitments, increase problem solving skills, and strengthen self-confidence (Gillman, 2006). Inclusive classrooms have found peers without disabilities having fewer prejudices and increased friendships, acceptance, and respect for individual differences (Kart & Kart, 2021).

In addition, many Michigan schools are making great strides in offering quality participation based peer programs, such as the Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START) Peer to Peer, which has positively impacted thousands of students, with and without disabilities, including autistic students. Rooted in evidence-based practices, Peer to Peer uses proactive, support-focused strategies to foster engagement, inclusion, and a sense of belonging for all students. A key to its success is equipping LINK peer partners with knowledge about autism and other disabilities, fostering opportunities to learn about and from each other, and building meaningful, reciprocal, and respectful relationships. Over the past 20+ years, START data shows that LINKS often gain valuable skills in empathy, leadership, compassion, and responsibility. In fact, a 2012–2013 START LINK outcomes study found that 80% of peer partners who were receiving tier-2 support saw GPA improvements in the very first semester they served as a peer partner. When implemented with fidelity, Peer to Peer has unmatched potential to create broad, lasting impacts on students, families, teachers, schools, and communities.

4-H Youth Programming

For over 100 years, 4-H programming has provided learning, hands-on opportunities for youth of all backgrounds and beliefs. Programming is delivered through Cooperative Extension, which is a community of over 100 public universities across the United States, and in Michigan, it is Michigan State University Extension. Youth in 4-H are provided with experiences in project areas such as science, health, agriculture, civic engagement, and other areas. [Diversity, equity, and inclusion \(DEI\)](#) has been identified as an impact area for the [National 4-H Council](#), and the need to close gaps in opportunities and access to programming that provides a sense of belonging.

Michigan 4-H Youth Development Program (YDP)

The [Michigan 4-H Youth Development Program \(YDP\) is administered by Michigan State University \(MSU\) Extension](#) is Michigan's largest youth development program and encourages inclusion opportunities for students with disabilities. Michigan 4-H programs have a rich heritage in the state with over 200,000 participants engaging in educational opportunities and gaining experience in their areas of interest and passion. The Michigan 4-H YDP provides opportunities for leadership, volunteering, civic engagement, and increasing self-image and confidence. Programming is available to youth ages 8-19 years and Cloverbud programming for children 5-8 years. Areas of programming include:

- [Volunteering and Mentoring](#): adult partnerships, volunteer training workshops, [inclusive 4-H](#), and more;
- [Animal Science](#): camps, beef production and management, companion animals, Cloverbuds (ages 5-8), swine, rabbits, poultry, sheep, horse and ponies including the [Proud Equestrian Program \(PEP\)](#) which concentrates on therapeutic riding for youth with disabilities, and more;
- [Arts](#): clothing and textiles, performing arts, Folkpatterns, and more;
- [Life Skills](#): academic success, 4-H food, health and well-being, clothing and textiles, character education, and more;
- [Science and Engineering](#): animal and vet science camp, beef production and management, engineering and technology, environmental and earth science, forestry fun camp, natural resources camp, animals across species, and more;
- [Environmental and Outdoor Education](#): entomology, environmental and earth science, Great Lakes and Natural Resources camps, plants/soils/gardening, renewable energy camp, shooting sports and tournaments, 4-H Youth Conservation Council, Outdoor Adventure Challenge, and more;

- [Global and Cultural Education](#): China project, clothing and textiles, Folkpatterns, international exchange programs, interstate exchanges, leadership and citizenship, World Food Prize Michigan Youth Institute, Visual Arts National 4-H Congress, and more;
- [Healthy Youth](#): Food/Health/Well-being, food and health camp, plants/soils/gardening, building strong adolescents, keeping food safe and youth gardening, Be SAFE, and more;
- [Leadership, Citizenship, & Service](#): community service and service learning, Tribal Citizen Academies, character education, 4-H Capitol Experience, and more;
- [Careers and Entrepreneurship](#): communications, money management, citizen planners, veterinary science, and more.

While there are good materials on the Michigan 4-H YDP Inclusive 4-H website, this could be expanded with guides or fact sheets for families, leaders, club members, and others interested in the program. Successful inclusion moves far beyond awareness or tolerance to acceptance and belonging. McCormick et. al., (2022) found the benefits of 4-H programming for autistic students promoted life skills, and further training is needed across 4-H to improve how inclusive practices are implemented. Training and resources specific to disabilities is important along with educating club members interacting with the members with disabilities.

Having access to 4-H programming offers inclusive experiences for autistic youth with existing peer groups with diverse and shared interests, natural social interaction and friendship opportunities, extracurricular and recreational activities which has been shown to reduce depression and loneliness, and provides inclusive opportunities for youth in rural areas (McCormick et. al., 2022). In a study conducted by LaVergne (2013), findings support the need to for 4-H to serve diverse populations throughout the country and provide a positive learning environment for every youth interested in joining 4-H; findings in their study supported the lack of information about 4-H programming options as the largest barrier to diverse and inclusive 4-H programs for youth with disabilities and youth of color. Gillman (2006) references the natural peer mentoring opportunities for community based organizations in the form of clubs offering meetings around areas of special interests or hobbies such as sewing, building model airplanes, gardening, and other activities. The Michigan 4-H YDP offers such opportunities.

In another study by LaVergne (2015), data indicates that 4-H youth programs at a national level are showing increases in enrollment by youth with disabilities and of color and that Extension programs across the nation have found ways to provide programming to diverse populations, but programming seems to be specific to geographic area. This study went on to suggest that successful inclusion of youth with disabilities in 4-H programming requires 4-H professionals to increase their understanding of the effect of 4-H on the youth in addition to assuring strategies for successful inclusion. Further, that if 4-H is going to become increasingly more inclusive and diverse, that a committed approach is needed and 4-H professionals and leaders are trained and prepared to accept the challenge of valuing all youth.

Goals in Developing a 4-H Peer Program

- Create awareness of opportunities for individuals with disabilities, including ASD, to have inclusionary experiences with their non-disabled peers around areas of interest which serve as a catalyst to relationship building and bonding around that interest.

- Increase partnerships between individuals with disabilities, families, the Michigan 4-H YDP, schools, and communities including adding this as an option for RCNs to offer families.
- Utilize the START iQuest across grade levels to increase collaboration with student home and school goals, using the iQuest process to guide implementation and targeting a 4-H program of interest.
- Create opportunities for raising expectations while participating socially in a local community-based educational, social, and recreational program.
- Increase parent participation in RCN activities, specifically parents actively involved or interested in 4-H programming.
- Create resources to increase understanding of 4-H and how it can be beneficial.
- Create processes for how a youth would engage in 4-H YDPs.

Existing Programs and Sources

Michigan [4-H is becoming increasingly inclusive](#), providing increased programming and resources to individuals with diverse abilities. There are several programs that currently exist in Michigan related to inclusion and individuals with disabilities participating in 4-H programming. The following are examples:

- [Inclusive 4-H Canine Project, Best Friends 4-H Club](#), PAWS-ATIVE Therapy, Berrien County, MI. An inclusive, 4-H canine therapy dog competition project to assist non-traditional (members with a lifelong disability) and traditional (members without a lifelong disability) in learning many areas of canine handling, training, ownership responsibility, and competitions.
- [Inclusive 4-H: What are the Benefits?](#) Article on why inclusion is important and outlines benefits
- [Lapeer County 4-H Swine Program "4-H Challenged Me"](#). Coordinators: Michele Peel, Tiffany Howell, Michelle Etson. Program involved opportunities for members with special needs aged 5-26 years to participate in a livestock show designed for them at the Eastern Michigan State Fair. The goal of the program provided an opportunity for youth with cognitive and physical disabilities to safely participate in a livestock exhibition. The program taught about various livestock species including pigs, sheep, and goats and were assigned a 4-H or FFA mentor that worked closely with the 4-H member and families. Training of mentors was conducted and a contact provided for questions or concerns.
- [Michigan 4-H Foundation](#): solicits, manages, grants and stewards support from private individuals, organizations, foundations and corporations to support Michigan 4-H Youth Development programs and support diversity, equity, and inclusion as referenced on their page.
- [Michigan 4-H Proud Equestrian Program \(PEP\)](#): a therapeutic horseback riding program founded in 1974 for people with physical, developmental, and cognitive disabilities. Volunteers work with participants with disabilities to gain confidence and enjoyment through riding horses, improve balance and coordination, and have fun.
- [MSU 4-H Exploration Days Buddy System for Participants with Disabilities](#): [MSU 4-H Exploration Days](#) is an annual event at MSU and is a pre-college program which welcomes youth ages 12-19 to explore their future, try new things and experience college life! During this three-day event, youth will gain confidence and independence through hands-on learning and make friends for a lifetime.
- [MSU 4-H Sensory Kit Piloted by Michigan 4-H Youth Development](#): supplies toolkits as a resource to MSU Extension staff and volunteers, the 4-H Mindful Clover Toolkit helps MSU Extension engage youth with disabilities or help alleviate stress and anxiety. The goals of the toolkit were to foster or enhance

inclusiveness, provide a tool for staff and volunteers to use in accommodating individuals with differing needs, increase sensory environment awareness, and build staff and volunteer capacity to foster inclusive learning environments.

- [MSU Extension: Inclusive 4-H](#): provides articles, publications and other resources promoting inclusivity in 4-H programming.

Other States with Strong Inclusive 4-H Programming

The [National 4-H Council](#) provides programming opportunities for over 6 million youth and over 500,000 volunteers across the United States in both rural and suburban areas. Members in 4-H join clubs and programs based on their interests in agriculture, civic engagement, healthy living, and STEM. 4-H youth are guided by mentors assisting with their development in their programs of choice. The National 4-H Council recognizes the importance of [diversity, equity, and inclusion](#), and is identified as a high impact area where people from all backgrounds are celebrated with an emphasis of closing opportunity gaps for American youth. An increasing number of states are offering inclusive programming.

- California: [Youth with Special Needs 4-H Adult Volunteer Handbook: Making 4-H More Accessible](#) (Rev 2013). Defines disabilities, hold parent conference, discuss “mainstreaming” or inclusion, review possible accommodations and modifications for participation, adaptive programming, and leadership engagement.
- Purdue University-[Inclusive 4-H](#): information about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizing student participation in extracurricular activities, and discusses how 4-H can play an empowering role in the lives of people with disabilities and their families. The 4-H program may provide opportunities for friendships and gain life skills. Purdue provides excellent resources: [Inclusive 4-H Webinar - "Welcoming Youth with a Wide Range of Abilities into your 4-H Program"](#); Inclusive 4-H members recorded brief videos on common questions about involving youth with disabilities (Encouraging Inclusion, Unexpected Behaviors, Communication Challenges, and more); resource sheets on various disabilities such as Down Syndrome, ADHD, Autism, and more; sample inclusion statements; additional resources.
- University of Minnesota, [Inclusive Programs for Youth with Disabilities](#): discusses why inclusion is important, effective practices for including youth with disabilities, and tips for program staff.
- [University of Missouri 4-H](#): provide resources in the Inclusion section with an Inclusive 4-H Plan Request Form, an Inclusive 4-H Plan Request of Leaders, and an Inclusive 4-H Plan Resource Guide for Volunteers.
- Washington State University, [4-H Youth Development Program](#): go to the Special Needs section of the page where numerous resources are provided on inclusion and autism.

Potential Barriers to Implementing 4-H Inclusive Programming

There are a number of potential barriers to implementations of the 4-H Inclusive programming:

- Lack of knowledge or interest in learning about 4-H in general.
- Limited programming options in a county.
- Perception that 4-H programs are only agricultural.
- Limited training or knowledge of the 4-H leader or professionals and understanding of the benefits of inclusion and how to promote ways to problem solve negative perceptions of persons with disabilities.

- Limited awareness of where to get training by the 4-H leader or professional.
- Recognition that peers need to be educated in the disabilities they are integrated with, and how to best support their fellow 4-H members with a disability.
- Parent interest or understanding the value in their child's participation.

Connecting Students to 4-H Peer Opportunities

START developed the [START iQuest](#) as a resource for families and school staff and to connect home and school, including identifying social opportunities for the student's engagement. The iQuest serves as a tool to identify and track specific goals for each student. Families may not be aware of the potential social opportunities such as 4-H programming, and opportunities based on interests of their child. The Michigan 4-H YDP could be incorporated as an option for families to pursue based on an interest inventory a child and family completes.

Connecting Families to 4-H Youth Programs

Families who are interested in learning more, reviewing options, or joining a club in Michigan 4-H Youth Programs can do the following:

1. Define the area of interest of the participant.
 - a. This is important to sharing interests and connecting with peers who have the same interest in common, and can be a catalyst to building longer term, meaningful friendships.
 - b. More than one area of interest can be explored.
 - c. Go to [MSU Extension](#) to learn more about Michigan 4-H YDP programs, information on inclusion, potential opportunities, and county contacts.
2. To connect with the local county 4-H Extension Program, go to:
 - a. [MSU Extension Counties](#) to obtain county contact name and website.
 - b. Every county Extension has its own website. Review the website for information on inclusive programming.
 - c. Contact the county Extension agent with questions and to find out about clubs in the county, leader information, their perspective on inclusion, and more.
 - d. If one county does not offer clubs in the area of interest of the participant, research other area counties that may offer other options. Participants can join clubs outside their county of residence.
 - e. Starting a club in an area of interest is also an option. This can be researched by contacting the county Extension agent.
3. Once a club is identified:
 - a. Contact the 4-H club leader or professional.
 - b. Discuss how the participant will be integrated to the club, including:
 - i. possible negative perceptions about having someone with a disability;
 - ii. whether others have been involved with disabilities and what type of disabilities;
 - iii. provide resource information about the disability;
 - iv. provide resource information for training in the disability;

- v. provide information about other 4-H clubs that have run successful inclusive programming;
 - vi. Offer options for training peers and leaders through local schools, non-profit agencies, and professionals.
- 4. Request any needed supports or accommodations:
 - a. If accommodations are needed for physical disabilities or supports for cognitive or developmental disabilities, let the 4-H Leader know.
 - i. provide examples of how the participant is supported in school and home;
 - ii. provide resources for developing supports such as examples of visuals, schedules, sensory needs, etc.
- 5. Schools can assist in connecting students to 4-H YDP:
 - a. Utilize the [START iQuest](#) with the family to identify extracurricular social opportunities through START.
 - b. Provide the Michigan 4-H Youth Development Program Information to families.
 - c. Provide training to clubs and peers about disabilities, peer support, and inclusion.

Resources

[National 4-H Council](#)

[4-H: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion](#)

[Michigan 4-H Youth Development](#)

[Michigan Join 4-H](#)

[Michigan MSU Extension 4-H](#)

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Appendix A

From the Wyoming 4-H Program, 4-H Handbooks for Leaders:

1. [4-H Youth with Special Needs Leader's Handbook](#) by Brandon Emerson and Nakia Wheeler
2. [4-H An Exclusively Inclusive Program](#) by Patricia Tatman, M.S., Department of Family and Consumer Sciences; University of Wyoming

4-H Articles by Patricia Tatman, M.S., Department of Family and Consumer Sciences; University of Wyoming:

1. [Youth and Asthma](#)
2. [Youth and ADHD](#)
3. [Youth and Autism](#)
4. [Tantrum vs Autism Meltdown Diagram](#)
5. [Youth and Cerebral Palsy](#)
6. [Youth and Diabetes](#)
7. [Youth and Down's Syndrome](#)
8. [Youth and Dyslexia](#)
9. [Youth and Epilepsy](#)
10. [Youth and Hearing Impairments](#)
11. [Youth and Muscular Dystrophy](#)
12. [Youth and Speech and Language Disorders](#)
13. [Youth and Spina Bifida](#)
14. [Youth and Spinal Cord Injuries](#)
15. [Youth and Tourette Syndrome](#)
16. [Youth and Visual Impairment](#)