

Water First for Thirst: Teen Leaders as Advocates for Healthier Beverage Consumption

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Water First for Thirst (WFFT) focuses on reducing sugar-sweetened beverage consumption and promoting drinking water as the healthy choice by educating and empowering youth to be advocates for the availability of healthier beverages through engagement in their communities.

The Issues: 4-H Healthy Living Mandate & Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Consumption

The 4-H mission involves engaging youth to reach their fullest potential and the 4-H Healthy Living mission mandate prescribes a focus on health promotion through projects and other activities.

Childhood obesity has more than tripled in the past 30 years. More than 30% of youth in Ohio are classified as overweight or obese. Children in Appalachian counties had significantly higher levels of overweight and obesity, reaching as high as 50%.¹

Obesity has both immediate and long-term effects; obese adolescents are more likely to have pre-diabetes, and obesity is a major contributor to health problems such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and many types of cancer.²

Sugary drinks are the top calorie source and single largest source of added sugars in the diet for adolescents.³ Evidence from nearly 90 studies demonstrates that consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages is associated with weight gain and obesity.⁴

The Framework: Social Ecological Model

According to the social ecological model of health behavior, factors across multiple domains influence food choices:

- **Individual level** (genetics, knowledge, attitudes, preferences, etc.)
- **Social level** (family, friends, peers, co-workers, etc.)
- **Organization level** (schools, stores, faith-based and non-profit organizations)
- **Policy and System level** (laws, organizational guidelines)

The model below depicts influences on beverage choices across these levels.



Based on Sallis JF, Cervero RB, Ascher W, Henderson KA, Kraft MK, Kerr J. An ecological approach to creating active living communities. *Ann Rev Pub Health*, 2006; 27: 14.1-14.26. doi: 10.1146/annurev.publhealth.27.021405.102100

The Method: Youth Advocacy

Youth advocacy is a potentially powerful tool to influence changes in environments and policies, as well as a strategy that benefits youth skill development and well-being. A review of peer-delivered health interventions showed that teens can be effective leaders.⁵



The Process: Youth Engagement

Testing activities

Teaching peers

Advocating for change

Teen Leaders: Eight teens from throughout Ohio were selected to serve as WFFT Teen Leaders. These youth spent three Saturdays together learning about the sugar content of sweetened beverages, ways to promote access to water, and ways to encourage water consumption.

Testing Activities: Teens tested activities for a proposed facilitator guide and provided feedback to the curriculum developers. They also helped to develop promotional materials and resource kits.

Training: A training event for 50 participants (youth and their adult leaders) was funded by a grant. The "WFFT Youth Activity Day" curriculum features hands-on lessons about sugary beverages. Attendees received an activity resource kit and developed an action plan.

Curriculum: The curriculum includes youth-led discussions about factors at various levels that influence beverage choices. Participants explore ways youth can support the provision of water at events and locations throughout their communities and encourage others to choose water over sugary beverages.

The Benefits: Mutual & Reciprocal

Benefits to Youth:

- Assume leadership roles, which develop confidence and skills
- Are empowered with knowledge and skills to take initiative and create change

Benefits to University Students:

- Have opportunities to apply knowledge gained in course work in real-life settings
- Gain workforce skills through internships and paid positions

Benefits to Faculty:

- Identify and address significant issues
- Have opportunities to teach, develop curriculum, conduct applied research, and develop peer-reviewed presentations
- Exercise multiple types of scholarship: application, teaching, integration, and discovery

Benefits to the Organization:

- Expand capacity to empower youth and create change
- Support and enact its mission
- Foster partnerships
- Leverage additional support



The Next Steps



- **Developing** a tool to measure youth advocacy efforts (in partnership with the OSU College of Public Health)
- **Creating** a statewide 4-H Healthy Living Advocate program, based on 4-H Healthy Living Ambassador programs in other states
- **Expanding** opportunities for youth advocacy in healthy living for teens involved in 4-H statewide
- **Broadening** the focus of topics within healthy living
- **Seeking** additional funding to expand these efforts
- **Institutionalizing** healthy living as an integral part of 4-H



References

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