

Acknowledgments

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Project Coordinated by:

Karen Pace, Associate Program Leader, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension

Writers:

- Cheryl Howell, 4-H Information Officer, ANR Communications, Michigan State University
- Mary Kronenberg, Former 4-H Youth Agent, Washtenaw County, Michigan State University Extension
- Karen Pace, Associate Program Leader, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension
- Marian Reiter, Graphic Artist, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension

Edited by:

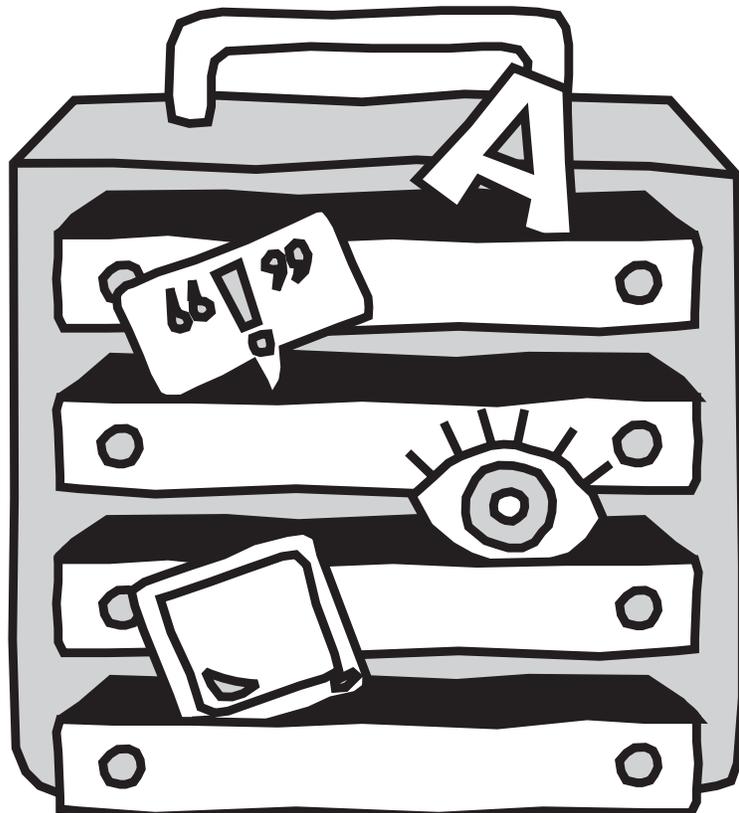
- Rebecca McKee, Editor, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension
- Mindy Popa Scherr, Freelance Editor

Graphic design by:

- Marian Reiter, Graphic Artist, 4-H Youth Development, Michigan State University Extension

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About This Toolkit

Introduction & General Information

Welcome to the **Communications Toolkit: Fun Skill-Building Activities to Do With Kids!** This resource was developed for people who work with young people aged 12 and up, although many of the activities can be adapted easily for use with younger children. In the toolkit you'll find information, activities and resources that will help kids build on their skills in vocal expression and public speaking, video, media relations, graphic design and writing.



Why Communications?

Helping kids build communication skills is often mentioned as one of the most important areas of youth development. The ways we communicate – as young people and as adults – cut across all that we do in life. Our interpersonal skills and how we express ourselves in written and spoken form have significant effects on our professional and personal endeavors throughout our lives. As we enter the 21st century, the need is greater than ever for young people to sharpen their skills in reading, writing, speaking and presenting information.

What's in This Toolkit & How You Can Use It

The *Communications Toolkit* is designed to be flexible and easy to use. It has five sections:

1. About This Toolkit
2. Written Communications
3. Vocal Expression and Public Speaking
4. Visual Communication and Graphic Design
5. Video, Media and Technology

Within each communication area you will find subsections:

- **What Leaders Need to Know** – Including an introduction, life skills that can be learned, a glossary of terms and other general information.

- **Skill Sheets** – Information on important skills that are needed for that communication area. Skill sheets are for you, the facilitator, and may be copied for young people, when appropriate.

- **Icebreakers, Activities and Projects** – Purposeful activities that help kids work in teams or on their own to build communication skills. Each activity lists information about the focus, purpose, materials, time, setting, procedure and tips for “talking it over” with participants.

- **Beyond the Toolkit: More Ideas and Resources** – Project ideas, books, resources and ideas on how to use the community as a classroom.

Most of the materials in this toolkit are written for *you*, the adult or teen facilitator who is working with kids aged 12 to 19. Some sections include copy-ready handouts for participants.

What Leaders Need to Know Self-Assessment & Evaluation

Many of the activities in the *Communications Toolkit* provide young people the opportunity for self-expression and creativity, which, for some kids, can be a bit scary. Consequently, the philosophy of this resource book is one of positive learning and growth. Your goal should be to create a safe, caring, positive learning environment in which young people can build on their communication skills.

Experienced communicators know that the best way to improve one's skills is through lots of practice. The best thing you can do as a leader is to provide varied opportunities for young people to practice and reflect on their skills in writing, speaking, graphics and video. The worst thing you can do is to allow negative, unhelpful criticism by other young people or adults, which can squelch interest in learning more about a topic. The experiences in this toolkit emphasize self-reflection and discussion to help young people think about how they feel about their own learning process and the areas they would like to learn more about. Some sections include information for you to use or adapt that can help you and others provide positive, helpful, constructive feedback for the young people with whom you work.

Later in this "About the Toolkit" section, you'll find a worksheet called "What I Learned." This form is for you to copy and distribute to the young people involved in activities or projects found in this toolkit. The self-assessment tool gives kids the chance to think about:

- What they've learned.
- How they feel about themselves related to the skill they've learned.
- Communication areas they'd like to learn more about.

Let kids reflect to themselves as they write their answers on this sheet, which is "for their eyes only." After they've filled it out, you can encourage small group discussion about what they learned or let those who are comfortable doing so share their responses with the whole group.

Communication Project Evaluation Guide

If you're working with young people in situations where you want to provide evaluative feedback on their communication projects, please consider using the following kinds of questions. For each of the questions, remember to provide the young people with information about what works well and constructive feedback about what they may want to try differently next time.

- Does it appear that the project is well thought-out?
- Is the purpose of the message clear and understandable?
- Does the message appeal to the intended audience?
- Does the method and format work with the message and intended audience?

Make the Toolkit Work for You!

Communications skill development can be woven into just about everything we do with young people.

Explore what your group is interested in and choose activities from the appropriate sections of this toolkit. Some people may choose to blend communications into what they're already doing with kids – using a variety of activities from the toolkit to meet their needs. Others may want to make communications more of a focus and use activities and other items from several sections of the toolkit over a period of time. Don't feel that you need to read all that's here or do *everything* provided in the order in which it appears in the toolkit. Pull what you need when you need it, and adapt it to fit your group.

Think about combining activities from all the sections to create a

larger project. Your group may want to create a local media campaign, for example, that helps people understand what it's like to be a teen, think about youth violence prevention, or discover the benefits of 4-H or another youth group.

The contents of this toolkit will help your group understand the importance of planning and working together as a team as they write news articles, create posters and produce television spots. Be creative! Explore the toolkit and create a plan for using what's here in ways that meet your needs and those of the young people with whom you work.

Using the Communications Toolkit to Meet Your Needs

When you're deciding how to use the *Communications Toolkit* with your group, first think about:

- What do you or other leaders need to know to help young people learn about communications?
- What do youth participants want and need to know about communications?
- What time and resources are available?
- What's the end goal – what would you like your communication training to accomplish?

Then pick and combine the materials that best meet your group's needs.

You can tailor the information and activities provided in the *Communication Toolkit* in many ways. For example, if you want to:

- **Jumpstart your own understanding of the different areas of communications and learn ways to introduce young people to the**

Communications Toolkit activities

– Review the “skill sheets” in each area, which provide basic subject matter information. Reading the “About This Toolkit” section as well as the “What Leaders Need to Know” introductory sections to each communication area will give you background for working with young people.

•**Get your youth group’s feet wet and expand their “comfort zones” in the different areas of communications** – Set up a fun, fast-paced and interactive communications “skill-a-thon” (a room set up with several learning stations that participants can rotate through) using short activities from different sections of the *Communications Toolkit*. You can structure the skill-a-thon so that participants rotate to a new activity after a set period of time. Look for icebreakers or activities that can be done in 30 minutes or less or that could be modified to fit a shorter format.

•**Use the *Communications Toolkit* “a la carte,” on an “as needed” basis** – Use the activities or skill sheets when the need arises. For instance, if your group needs to write for a newsletter or put together awards documentation, check the “Written Communications” section; prepare for public speaking at an upcoming event, check the “Vocal Expression and Public Speaking” sec-



tion; videotape a group performance or activity, check the “Video, Media and Technology” section; design graphics for a poster or display, check the “Visual Communications and Graphic Design” section.

•**Take your group on an in-depth exploration of a communications area they’re interested in** – Pick one of the communications areas and go through all of the activities. Investigate the “Try This, Too” ideas that accompany many activities. Consider the resource materials listed in the “Beyond the Toolkit: More Ideas and Resources” section for that particular communication area.

•**Start with a project idea and explore the communication areas needed to carry out the project** – Develop a communications campaign around a community service topic or a public awareness message. Use relevant activities from the *Communications Toolkit*, applying the projects to fit the theme you have in mind.

The Communication Process

Whether you’re developing a speech, writing a news article, creating a poster or producing a videotape, it’s important to understand the basic communication process. Communication can be defined as “*a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or information.*” You can apply this definition to the development of oral, written, graphic and video presentations.

“*A process by which information is exchanged between individuals...*” This phrase emphasizes that you must have a message or something to share (information) for commu-

nication to take place. This is also called a goal or “**objective.**” For example, an objective for a speech could be to help young people learn the health risks of smoking cigarettes.

The definition also emphasizes that communication is a process between individuals or groups. This is called your “**audience**” – the types of people who will see or hear your message. In the example above, the audience for the antismoking message is young people. It’s very important to know as much as possible about your audience. You must narrow in on who they are, what their beliefs and attitudes are, what they may and may not know about your topic, and more.

For example, you could specifically target kids aged 11 and 12 who attend your local middle school. Knowing your audience usually requires some detective work. This could include research such as asking questions of people in your target audience and of others who are experts on that particular group but who may not be members of the group themselves.

“...through a common system of symbols, signs or information.”

This part of the definition of communication stresses the importance of the **method**, or format, you choose to share your message. Keep in mind that communication is a two-way process between people and groups.

When you carefully consider the audience you’re trying to reach, you can craft your message in a way that will be meaningful to that group. Would a flier or a video work best? Can you reach your group by making a powerful speech at a school assembly or service club meeting?

Keeping your intended audience in mind, you must carefully consider

and choose the following elements when crafting your message:

- Language and words (style, slang, educational level)
- Type and number of graphic symbols
- Style
- Rhythm of your message

For example, if you want to reach preteens with an anti-smoking message, a short presentation by a peer about how “uncool” it is to stink like stale smoke and how smoking slows you down on the basketball court may make sense. Perhaps a rap song with this message would capture the attention of your 11- and 12-year-olds. Would a rap work best as a live performance or as a video? Could you do both? If you’re preparing an antismoking message for adults, would a rap song – whether performed live or on video – work? Probably not.

With any communication project, it’s important to:

1. Clearly define your message. (Try to keep it to one key idea.)
2. Carefully identify your target audience. (Be very specific.)
3. Select the methods, approaches and formats that will work best for that group. (What mix of oral, written, video, graphic, computer or other methods will best reach your audience?)
4. Find out how you did. (Ask members of your target audience, through interviews or surveys, whether they think your communication efforts worked!)

How to Brainstorm

Many activities in the *Communications Toolkit* recommend that you help kids brainstorm ideas before

they begin an activity or project. Brainstorming encourages everyone in a group to share ideas and explore as many approaches to a problem or project as possible. It’s kind of a creative thinking free-for-all!

Many ideas that seem impractical at first may evolve into very useful and wonderful solutions. Business people, scientists, educators and others in the work world use brainstorming all the time to create innovative, problem-solving approaches.

Here’s a quick lesson on how to brainstorm.

1. Have large sheets of paper (such as newsprint) and markers available to write down everyone’s ideas.
2. Explain to the young people that everyone’s thoughts and ideas are valid (even if they sound far-fetched or seem a little weird.) Brainstorming is not a time for evaluating or judging ideas. The goal is to get lots of ideas on the table. Put-downs are not acceptable.
3. Give everyone who wants to share the opportunity to do so. Don’t let one or two kids dominate the group.
4. After the group members have shared all the ideas they can think of, begin a fair and democratic process of discussing which idea (or combination of ideas) the group thinks will work best for the particular situation.

Encourage the kids to follow these rules while brainstorming:

Rule 1: Do not judge ideas!

Rule 2: It’s okay to be far-out.

Rule 3: Think of as many ideas as you can.

Rule 4: Piggyback on someone else’s ideas.



You may want to write these rules on a sheet of newsprint and display the sheet where all the kids can see it.

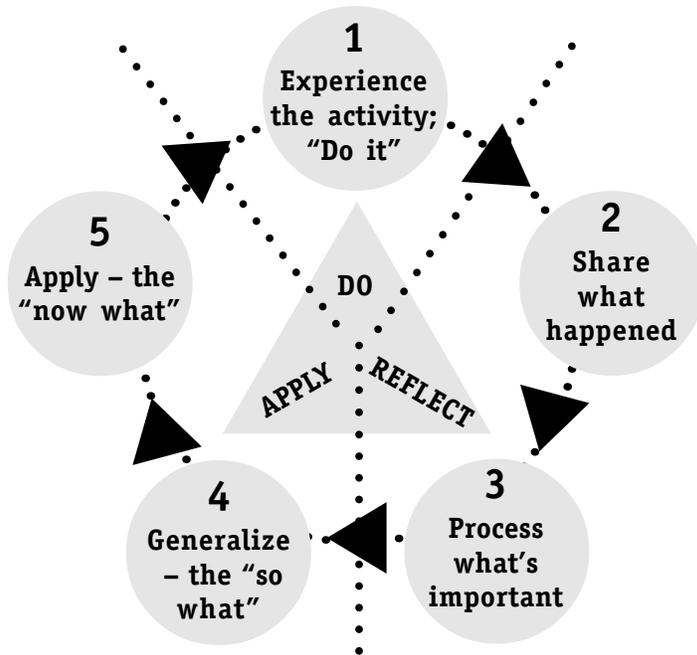
Help Kids “Learn By Doing”: The Experiential Learning Model

Decades of research have provided evidence that the experiential learning model is a very effective method for helping children learn. And it’s really not complicated at all! The experiential learning model is based on the work of John Dewey and emphasizes the importance of building in opportunities for kids to Do – Reflect – Apply.

•“Do” refers to hands-on learning, including activities and projects that get young people actively involved with the subject matter. In this toolkit you will find activities that actively engage teens in the process of learning and skill-building through creating posters, speeches, videos and other projects.

•“Reflect” refers to taking time after the activity or project is completed to think about and share what happened, the importance of what was learned, and the feelings young people have about what they learned. Each activity in this toolkit includes a “Talking It Over” section that helps the leader guide this thinking and sharing process.

Help Kids “Learn By Doing”: The Experiential Learning Model



• **“Apply”** refers to taking the activity to another level by thinking and talking about how the information learned through the activity can be applied to “real life” situations and other learning opportunities. Throughout this toolkit you will find references to real career opportunities in the area of communications. The “Beyond the Toolkit” sections will help you guide young people in applying what they’ve learned to new and future learning opportunities. Activities also include sections called “Try This, Too” and “Where to Go From Here” to guide you in helping kids apply what they’re learning to new situations.

The Importance of Bias-Free Communication

As you help young people develop or strengthen their communication skills, one very important area to consider is the use of language and images. Words and pictures have power – more power than we may realize. They can include or exclude,

stereotype or provide accurate information about people. Words and images can encourage or discourage, diminish and degrade. When messages around us every day in books, radio, television or newspapers contain information that reflects sexism, racism, adultism and other biases, the impact on readers, viewers and learners is profound. There are critically important connections between our thoughts, words and actions, and the language we use reflects and helps shape society. Here are a few things to consider about helping young people develop bias-free communication habits:

• Biased words and phrases make unfair assumptions about some groups, label people in ways that they do not choose for themselves, use maleness as the norm, and treat femaleness as the exception. An example of the latter is the use of “he, him, mankind” and other so-called universal terms that are clearly gender-biased. Another example is the use of suffixes such as *-ess*, *-ette* and *trix* in words like “poetess,” which means a female poet, while

the word “poet” means a person who writes poetry. “Poet” is considered the norm, and “poetess” a deviant from the norm. See the problem? A poet is defined as “one who writes poetry” while a poetess is defined as “a female poet.” Such wording implies that men are “the real thing” and women are “*not quite* the real thing.” Some other phrases, such as “man and wife,” imply inequities. In this phrase, women are referred to unfairly because the woman is identified only in terms of her relationship to the man. The fair and appropriate phrase to use is either “husband and wife” or “man and woman.”

• Remember that when referring to a person who has a physical difference or health challenge, always “put the person first.” For example, don’t label someone “handicapped” or “disabled,” refer to him or her as “a person with a disability” or “a person who is physically challenged.” A person is not an “AIDS victim” but rather “a person who has AIDS.”

• Keep in mind that the only thing constant about language is that it is constantly changing. Just when you thought you knew the preferred way to refer to a particular group of people, for example, more options emerge that some would prefer. It’s important to monitor the changes and nuances of words and language in order to be as respectful as possible. When you’re confused about how to refer to someone, the best approach is to *ask* the person (for example, “Do you prefer Ms. or Mrs.?” or “Do you prefer Black or African American?”).

• Just as thoughtful writers give careful attention to spelling, grammar and sentence structure, so must we give careful consideration and effort to searching for unbiased words. This applies to choosing words for oral communication as

well. A book called *The Bias-Free Word Finder: A Dictionary of Nondiscriminatory Language*, by Rosalie Maggio (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press Books, 1991), is an excellent resource for understanding the reasons why creating bias-free communication is so important. It also provides an extensive dictionary of nondiscriminatory language.

- When creating or choosing images and pictures, be careful to be inclusive. Images that are inclusive convey the message that “all are welcome here” and this information is open and available to all. For example, if teens are developing a videotape that documents “life in our community,” the people videotaped ought to reflect different kinds of people who do, in fact, live in the community. Think about including a variety of people who reflect diversity of ages, race and ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, disability and so on. And be careful not to stereotype people. Don’t portray certain groups in ways that tend to be inaccurate stereotypes and over-generalizations of that group.

About Kids in This Age Range

The *Communications Toolkit* will help you create learning opportunities for young people 12 and up. (Some activities may be adapted for younger children.) When working with teens, it’s important to keep in mind the stage of development they are in. Here are some important factors to consider:

Younger Teens (Aged 12 to 15)

- Young people in this age range are moving from concrete thinking to-

ward the ability to think abstractly. They enjoy playing with ideas, and you can provide opportunities for them to explore new areas of interest. Issues of values, justice and equality may become very important to them. Caring adults can provide positive opportunities for discussion, self-reflection and growth.

- Social acceptance and peer groups become increasingly important to kids this age. Clubs, classrooms and youth groups should be supportive, caring environments in which young people feel connected and accepted by adults and peers. Adults can set the tone for a group by expecting respectful behavior and modeling it themselves in their interactions with young people and other adults. Young people this age can and should be actively involved in selecting the direction of their learning activities. Adults show respectful behavior toward teens when they ask for and value their ideas and opinions.

- The early teen years can be an emotional roller coaster for many young people. Fast-changing bodies and hormones can cause mood swings and behaviors that look adult-like one minute and child-like the next. For some teens, this can be a time of challenge to their self-concept. You can help teens through this potential time of turmoil by being accepting and caring. Help younger teens reflect on what they’re good at and identify their personal strengths.

Older Teens (Aged 16 to 18)

- Teens in this age range are beginning to master abstract thinking and are likely to be focused on and concerned about their futures. Career

exploration and preparation become increasingly important. Adults can help teens “try on” different skills and careers, and the *Communications Toolkit* provides many activities and project ideas to get them started.

- Older teens often have an intense need to “belong” to groups outside the family. They see themselves as quite capable of choosing their own activities and projects and much prefer to do so. The role of an adult shifts away from “leader/teacher” to “advisor/confidant.” Adults can “open the door” to new experiences and explorations that older teens crave.

- Older teens have the capacity to understand the needs and feelings of others even though they may not consistently portray this empathy. Opportunities for community service give them the chance to deepen their understanding and strengthen their relationships to others in the community. One way to explore community service is to have older teens help teach middle school-aged young people communication skills using the activities in the *Communications Toolkit*.



