4-H L.E.A.F.

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4-H L.E.A.F. is a six week program that focused on teaching healthy living to the 4-Hers of the day camp. The program met in Gurney and Mercer, two days a week at each Iron County location. Our day campers ranged from grade one to grade four.

Our goal for the program was to engage our 4-Hers in activities that promote physical activity and healthy eating to create a healthy lifestyle that they can continue for the rest of their lives. In addition, we wanted to introduce our 4-Hers to new places nearby in their community. To help us, we used the Fit-tastic Curriculum from Wood County Nutrition Education and the UW-Extension Nutrition Education Program Youth Curriculum Source Book.

One way we achieved our goal was to show the kids fun ways to exercise. This included things such as: playing active games, hiking, dancing, walking, and swimming. We also organized a circuit that we started out each day with that included work out stations such as: sit ups, push-ups, hula hooping, skipping, hopping, and jumping jacks. Our goal was to see an improvement as time went on from the 4-Hers’s endurance and ability. Although in the beginning it was difficult to get the kids to go through the circuit, by the end of the program we noticed a definite in change in attitude and effort put forward. When the kids would show up in the morning, they were ready to start their day with the circuit.

Healthy eating was also a major focus this summer. To keep the 4-Hers on track, we had a changing theme of the week through the program. Weekly themes included: vegetables, fruits, healthy drinks, and packing a healthy lunch. Each day, we created two snacks that would be appropriate for each theme of the week. By using activities in the curriculum, we were able to teach 4-Hers the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables. We had the opportunity to bring in our WNEP nutrition coordinator to help teach lessons on fruit and packing a healthy lunch. By using fun activities and snacks that the 4-Hers were able to prepare themselves, our 4-Hers wanted to learn more about what they were putting in their bodies.

We used arts and crafts to drive our point home. One of our arts and craft projects we did in the program was focused on the new USDA’s My Plate model. Each 4-Her created a plate, divided into four sections, using the nutrition guidelines promoted by Michelle Obama. Another project used the 4-H Pallet of Fun Arts and Crafts Curriculum. We had our day campers construct a tissue paper painting of their favorite fruit.

To accomplish our last goal, we found various places near our day camps that
emphasized the wonderful area we live in. Some places that we took our 4-Hers to were on a hiking trip to Copper Falls, a swimming day at Saxon Harbor and Mercer’s lakes, picking a healthy snack at the berry farm in Saxon, walking to Potato River Falls, and taking a trip to the Iron County Fair. All of these activities promoted our goal of physical activity while showing the 4-Hers places they are able to come back to with their parents.

Walking to Potato River Falls was a great accomplishment for our group in Gurney. We tried our first week and we were not able to make it very far at all before the kids wanted to head back to the community center. Eventually, we were able to work our way up to 1 mile, but exhaustion soon set in. As the weeks continued on, our 4-Hers were determined to make the full 3 mile walk. Once they reached their goal, they felt a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Gurney and Mercer are both considered low income areas of our rural county. Because of this, many of the 4-Hers may not have ever had the chance to go some of the places that we were able to take them. The program was very affordable for the parents, which contributed to our number of 33 4-Hers enrolled for eleven sessions each. This has been the highest number of 4-Hers enrolled in 4-H L.E.A.F. since its start four years ago. This indicates that the program is filling a need families who want their children involved in an organized program during the summer.

We know that we were able to achieve the goals we created at the beginning of the program. Ways that we know this include the 4-Hers telling us about the new foods that they have tried at home and about physical activity that they had done the days between camp sessions. We also observed improvements in the packed lunches following the lessons on healthy lunches and an educational piece delivered to parents from our Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program. We know that 100% of our 4-Hers have tried a new healthy food in our program. We also know we made a great impression in the youth members who attended 4-H L.E.A.F. program from our observations and interactions with other members.

4-H L.E.A.F. members also discussed their experiences with the Youth Development Educator who had minimal presence during the day camp days. Members told her what they did during the day camp and helped her learn things they had learned during this program. These discussions support the observations above.

Day campers clearly associated the circuit with “getting in shape” and “getting stronger” and many noted that the day camp “made it fun to exercise.” One camper said “we practiced and we got better.” Memories of snacks they helped prepare were prominent. That the snacks were healthy choices was a repeated message—“so we would eat healthier” and “so we will eat vegetables instead of junk.” Making orange juice with strawberries for ice cubes, trying new foods such as green peppers and broccoli were among the favorite things about the camp. Other favorites were all of the games that were played and the art projects. Campers thought the day camp was important because they got to be with friends, and because they would be “healthier.”