



# CREATING SAFE SPACES THROUGH MUTUAL AFFIRMATION

By  
**Michael Wallace**, Associate Professor, 4-H Regional Specialist.  
**Alison White**, Assistant Professor, 4-H Regional Specialist  
**Mary Katherine Deen**, Professor, Family/4-H Youth Development Specialist.  
**Mike Jensen**, Associate Professor/WSU 4-H Camp Specialist



# Creating Safe Spaces through Mutual Affirmation

4-H activities including 4-H clubs, camps, fairs, and after school programs are intended to be spaces where youth have the opportunity to develop belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. However, developing positive connections, engaging in learning, exhibiting individual identity, and understanding one's value to a community can be difficult tasks for youth who often feel left out or left behind. Whether exclusion happens intentionally or unintentionally, it has repercussions not only for the youth but for the entire group. 4-H volunteers and staff can support and empower youth by carefully examining their biases and preferences, as well as those that exist collectively in their groups. They can demonstrate openness and non-judgmental communication. Providing youth with authentic opportunities to express differences in a safe and supportive environment models effective leadership while building healthier communities and developmental supports.

## The Values of our Organization

4-H programs abide by the federal USDA and land grant university non-discrimination policies (USDA 2015; WSU 4-H Policy and Procedure Handbook 2016). Therefore, leaders must be open and willing to accommodate and respect diversity among youth, families, and adults in all 4-H program settings. Diversity may be expressed in many ways including age; physical, mental, or sensory ability; race; color; creed; national or ethnic origin; sex/gender; sexual orientation; gender identity/expression; religion; class; philosophy; and culture. By choosing to lead in the 4-H program, adults agree to abide by the program's expectations: creating safe and affirming spaces for *all* youth. Leaders and staff must endeavor to model, communicate and uphold values of inclusion, and support a developing culture of positive belonging. *All* youth need opportunities to safely develop and explore their emerging identities as unique individuals and future leaders. "The Body" activity, described in detail later in this fact sheet, lays a positive foundation for this kind of interpersonal recognition of differences, which is vital in early group formation (Tuckman 1965).

## Aligning Personal Values

People gain knowledge by using generalizations and preferences to categorize and identify differences as they learn and grow. Knowing what we prefer is a part of self-definition, however, as we define ourselves through differences it is possible that overlooked, non-inclusive biases can form, and even calcify into unhealthy prejudices.

## Identifying & Unlearning Bias and Prejudice

Since our program policy requires non-discrimination, we must attempt to be sensitive to what others *perceive* as discrimination, and to offer safe and supportive spaces for dialogue that values individual differences. How do generalizations intended to help us develop understanding become prejudices that interfere with interpersonal communication? 4-H staff and volunteers need to be willing to examine their beliefs and determine when they are demonstrating prejudicial behavior. The easiest way to begin is to ask yourself "Are there protected classes listed in the program policy that I feel uncomfortable about?"

A **Preference** is our individual proclivity to place one thing before another, giving priority or advantage to one idea or thing over another as a way of defining ourselves. There is no harm in having preferences and all of us have them. "*I believe I like chocolate cake.*"

**Bias** emerges as our preferences begin to hinder our ability to make impartial or objective choices. "*I like cake, so I often choose it over other options*" becomes "*I like cake, and I don't want to eat anything else.*" Problems can occur when individuals or groups rank one part of their identity so highly that other parts get ignored (Skuzza and Russo 2014).

A **Prejudice** is a judgement, opinion or attitude held in disregard of the facts, often formed before all the facts are known (Chappelle and Bigman 1998). This is the *knowing-without-thinking* that can turn into stereotyping. "*Brussel sprouts are gross therefore all vegetables are gross.*"

Stereotypes applied to individuals are flawed because they assume that two separate and distinct people are "the same." Can we truly categorize two individuals (each of whom are developing as separate beings with distinct experiences and temperaments) as "the same?" Bias and prejudice can present challenges to creating inclusive environments. By being mindful of the beliefs we hold about "groups" of people, we may be able to proactively recognize our prejudicial behavior. Unfortunately, long held beliefs, including those that emerge from our cultures, can operate like icebergs, with the majority of influence happening beneath conscious awareness. Our personal histories, beliefs, and values can become difficult barriers for others if we are not aware that how we are expressing ourselves may be interpreted as prejudicial (National 4-H 1996).

Biases and prejudice are often exhibited in non-verbal cues, indirect actions, as well as verbal statements.

A vital first step towards “un-learning” personal and collective bias and prejudice is to acknowledge that we want our intentions towards others to be positive. To initiate this process with others in a safe space, “The Body” activity begins by acknowledging that we all have similar preferences: (1) we prefer to have our strengths acknowledged and (2) we would prefer to avoid things we find unpleasant. “The Body” activity offers the *beginning* of a conversation about shared beliefs that a group can then carry on throughout their collaborations. Examples of “The Body” activity can be found in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

## “The Body”

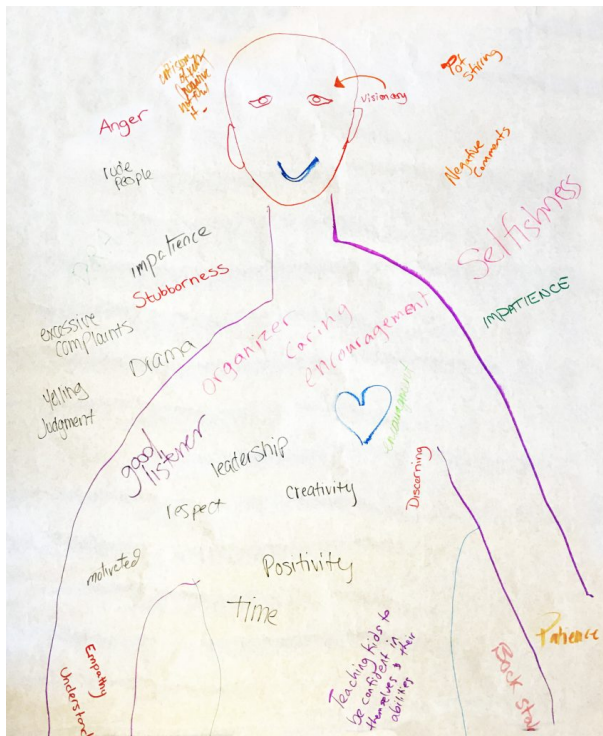


Figure 1. Example of “The Body” activity.

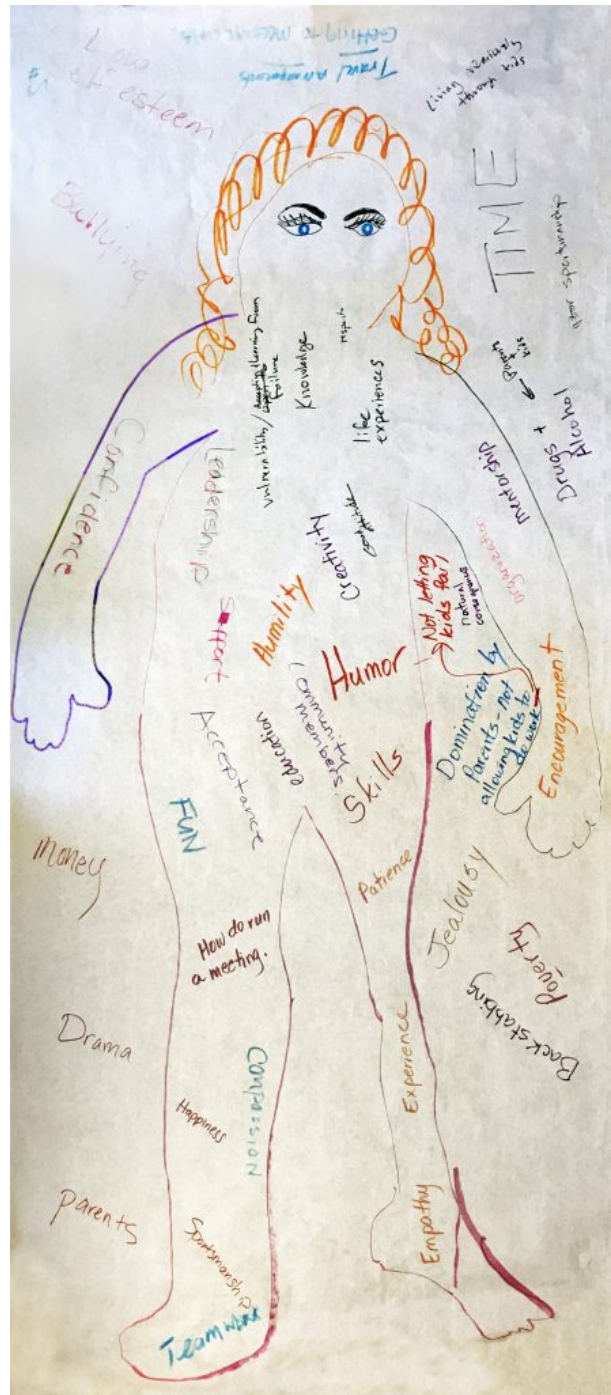


Figure 2. Example of “The Body” activity.

“The Body” is an activity adapted from Project Adventure’s Youth Leadership in Action (1994) and “The Peaceable Being” from *Adventures in Peacemaking* (Kreidler and Furlong 1995). It helps a group identify their strengths and expectations. It can also enhance social responsibility and overall group cohesion by helping us see beyond differences to what needs we all have in common.

It helps young people voice their strengths and challenges in the context of the 4-H community and can provide adult staff volunteers with valuable insights for understanding and supporting individual differences.

**Materials:**

A large piece of newsprint or cardboard box cut open  
Colored markers (non-permanent ink)

**Step 1:**

Spread the newsprint on the ground and tell the youth that they are going to create a new club member with whom each of them will share something in common. Ask one member to step up and go first. The first participant will lay on the newsprint and choose another member to trace one part of their body onto the paper. The goal is that each member contributes one part of themselves to the final “body.” Youth usually enjoy taking some time filling in the new member with details, (hats, jewelry, a face, etc.).

**Step 2:**

Have the youth think about the strengths they have that they can share with each other and the club. They should each write (or illustrate) their personal strengths inside the outline of the body. They can add as many as they like (that they feel are true.) You can also ask them to identify the things about themselves that are unique that make them feel proud.

When the youth seem to have exhausted their list of strengths, ask them what sorts of behaviors or attitudes they would like left out of the group. “What sorts of things have you seen or heard people do or say, or what behaviors do you sometimes exhibit, that are hurtful? What do you want left outside of our group?” Have them write these negatives outside of the body outline.

**Step 3:**

Have youth go around the circle twice, first sharing all their strengths, and after that sharing all the things they don’t want in their club. Sometimes youth are so delighted to share their ideas that they forget to hear the ideas of others. Make sure perspectives and desires are clearly heard and understood. When answers seem vague, broad or glib, as the adult staff or volunteer you can *ask for more clarification*. Leaders should not discount youth member contributions, however, contributions that conflict with the values of the program should be reframed in positive, inclusive language. A leader or staff should *NOT* draw attention to specific individual differences if the person who has those unique traits does not want to bring them up. If the group agrees that this “new member” represents what they all want and can respect from each other, ask them to give a thumbs up or sign inside the body.

## Following Their Lead

“The Body” is more than an activity to fill time. It is the establishment of a group agreement that the adult volunteers can use to create an ongoing safe and supportive environment (Albert 1996). “The Body” is best when done early in the formation of a group. Here are a few suggestions to build off “The Body” activity.

1. *Revisit the Body* at the beginning of the first few meetings. Have it up on the wall, ask the youth to remind everyone about their strengths and needs, and ask if they have anything they want to add or change. Don’t throw away “The Body.” When new members join your group late, give them an opportunity to add to “The Body,” and give all the other members a chance to express once more their strengths and challenges. Take a few minutes to “check-in” at each meeting before diving into activities to show your members that their input and presence is valued.
2. *Defend the Body*. It is one thing to establish expectations, it’s another thing to remain conscious of them. Introduce “Put Ups instead of Put Downs” (Frank 2001). When you see a youth contributing a strength they identified, be vocal in praise of it. Encourage all members to honor the strengths their peers have agreed to bring forward. When you see a behavior from outside the body being demonstrated, be equally vocal about it. “I thought we agreed we weren’t going to...” When staff and leaders model using “put ups,” the youth will try it as well. Staff and leaders can reinforce the groups’ chosen norms and expectations without coopting them as a disciplinary strategy. (Tuckman 1965; Vanderwey et al. 2014).
3. *Walk the Walk*. When you ask the youth to support the expectations of the group they will expect you to do the same. If you don’t, neither will they. Much of the bullying that is exhibited towards differences emerges when young people read the subtle cues that adults are intolerant. If you don’t defend differences, if you turn a blind eye to the physical and emotional safety of ostracized individuals or groups, you are essentially validating the bully’s behaviors. When youth establish group expectations the leader must be the **FIRST** champion of those hopes and needs.

“The Body” activity provides a structure for inclusion by asking members to clarify how they can contribute positively to a group, and asking them to openly share things they find challenging.

It is not uncommon for sensitivity to bias and stereotypes to emerge as a topic of these conversations. “Bullying” is another common theme that frequently emerges in this activity. Giving people the opportunity to establish themselves as an equal member of a group with an equal voice is the first step towards addressing and acknowledging differences in a positive way. “The Body” is a youth-friendly contract for establishing an inclusive community.

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