

## *Fall 2022 – Kimberly Fisher*

The 4H/VA Cooperative Extension program has been influential in the lives of youth through hands-on clubs. These clubs ranged in topics like food safety, SNAP-ed, and agriculture. I have had personal experience with this amazing organization through its summer camps and youth development programs. During this time, I fell in love with their mission of creating a positive and encouraging learning environment for our youth. The activities and programs were very interactive and catered to building confidence among those involved. I wanted to enhance this connection with broader topics like mental health, mindfulness, and emotional regulation.

Youth these days are under so much stress and do not have access to the tools or resources to deal with them. So, I wanted to use the trust behind 4H to expose youth to these concepts in a new and engaging way that followed the mission of 4H. The mission of 4-H/ VA Cooperative Extension is to: “assist youth and adults working with those youth to gain additional knowledge, life skills, and attitudes that will further their development as self-directing, contributing, and productive members of society.”

During my time at 4H, I was able to perform many various tasks and experiences. I have had limited experience working one-on-one with children in the past. So, I was excited to join my supervisor Rosemary’s classroom visits around the Rockingham area. I was allowed to travel to and observe local schools like John C Meyers and Ottobine Elementary. I also researched and investigated local resources and community agencies to connect and collaborate with. I also was able to help create and prepare educational materials for our classroom visits. In addition, I was able to research 4H activities and resources for potential data collection. Lastly, I led, created, and coordinated a mental health workshop with 4H for a group of local kids.

When I first arrived at my site, I was welcomed with warmth and lots of support for me and my projects. I felt completely supported in my ideas and felt trust in discussing and creating new concepts. Rosemary and I would have regular meetings to talk over my duties and goals for the workshop/semester, which helped me with any worry I had about leading the workshop. Rosemary was incredibly supportive in giving me resources and advice when I felt any anxiety. She was an amazing help in letting me lead and put my own creative spin on what I wanted for the workshop. The office staff were also so accommodating to me; if they saw that I didn’t have any task, they would let me help them with their different types of tasks. These tasks ranged from learning to can for a workshop to watching over a cute turkey named Snowball! I truly appreciate the diverse experiences I had while interning here. I truly was able to experience many different aspects of Rockingham 4H, and I am grateful for that!

Most of my disadvantages came from my lack of experience with children. I have really had time to work one on one with kids this semester. Nonetheless, it was hard for me to relate and connect with them. My main struggle was relating and connecting with the kids. I wasn’t familiar with the more rural environment and culture in those areas. My main fears and concerns are focused on working and blending with new people with different demographic views. I am originally from Virginia Beach, an urban city area, so my main work environment has been more urban-like. So, working with people who have lived here in Rockingham for most of their lives was a culture shock for me.

However, once I was in the zone, I was able to efficiently work on finding activities that would be engaging for the kids. I was able to research a lot of different activities through 4H and mental health resources like the Greater Good Magazine. To combat this, with the help of the 4H staff, I was able to go into local schools and help/observe what best engages the type of children in these areas, so I can best cater my activities and demeanor to benefit them effectively. This skill of adaptation has and will help me in future career opportunities where I will have to adjust to working with different cultures.

For my contribution project, I created a workshop where kids can learn different coping mechanisms for stress, like deep breathing, art therapy, music therapy, stimulation/grounding, physical activities, and reciprocal self-disclosure. They would learn these techniques through fun and engaging activities like creating worry monsters through deep breathing, physical exercise by taking them to a jump park, and self-reciprocal disclosure through an icebreaker Jenga activity.

Many of my activities are related to the social connection research lab I was in last semester. Many of the activities, concepts, and research centered around mindfulness and connection, something I really wanted to endorse in my workshop. The research around the Emotion Jenga was connected to Aron et al.'s research into questions that increase connectedness. These questions go into the concept of 'reciprocal self-disclosure, which means disclosing personal info about oneself to another person and doing the same back to them. I learned more about these techniques for social connection during my lab, where we focused on applying these to college students. That's where I saw that these techniques could also be applied to kids as well. Other methods I utilized from the lab were deep breathing and the use of meditation. During my workshop, I was able to have the kids do a quick 5-minute meditation to center themselves before we got into our activities. This definitely helped the kids center themselves, allowing for my presentation and activities to go more smoothly. The overall day went extremely well, with the kids actively questioning and trying the new techniques I covered. It was an extremely fulfilling experience, and I love that the kids were able to take something positive from their 4H encounter as well as mine!

For my future career plans, I want to create long-lasting educational items like posters and presentations that would be presented in schools. I hope that with the success of my workshop, I will be able to add more research-backed workshops and in-school activities like mine in different areas to help eliminate the mental health crisis in our children.