Summer is often boring for children left at home with little supervision. We know there are many activities for "self starters" with initiative, but few youth have developed a love for independent activities such as reading and puzzles. Youth seem to prefer video games, computer chat rooms and television, even though there are a variety of other opportunities at home. Sometimes, opportunities for activity and interaction with other children are limited. Summer camp is one way to provide organized, supervised fun for summer days.

Florida 4-H offers a variety of summer activities for youth. Local clubs in neighborhoods have picnics, play games and make crafts while providing youth a variety of hands-on activities and opportunities to develop skills in leadership and citizenship.

Summer camp experiences are another way to provide supervised fun for youth.

I just spent a week with 131 youth from Osceola and Lake County 4-H programs. We spent a week in "Tropical Paradise" at 4-H Camp Ocala in the Ocala National Forest, north of Eustis.

Cindy Moore, 4-H Coordinator with Osceola County Extension, has been working for months with local teen 4-H members to plan the fun filled week.

It is a renewing experience to see 4-H camp staff, teen counselors, volunteer leaders and campers having such a great time learning, playing, swimming, making new friends, making crafts, sailing, and canoeing. Boredom is not in the plans. Campfires, volleyball, candle making, scavenger hunts, silly songs, fruit smoothies, a luau and relay races are part of the busy schedule.

Parents are amazed to find out the youth actually work together to keep their cabin clean. They share responsibility for cleaning up after meals. They learn to put away toys, games, and craft supplies when they are finished using them. They hang up towels to dry and make their own beds. They sweep floors and wipe off dining tables. They see that taking responsibility and being on time for meals and activities means more time for fun.

Older teens serve in leadership roles as counselors and class instructors. Charlie Mack, Mike Ream and Kyle Smith served as cabin counselors and helped keep the boys on track. Jennifer Andress, Anna Best, Ashley Conley, Brooke Davis, Carrie Dunn, Jennifer Jones, and Jill Smith helped organize the girl campers.

Younger teens serve as counselors in training or CIT's and shadowing the more experienced youth. Younger campers get encouragement, praise and sometimes prodding as they participate in activities.

In keeping with the tropical theme, teens also worked in teams to teach activities such as sailing, basket making, coconut art, ice candles, tropical fish art, exotic floral pens, volcanoes, scrapbooks, aloha necklaces and tropical plants. Food classes included pineapple treats, fruit smoothies, and luau barbecue with skewers of meat and vegetables.

Teaching classes gave youth a new perspective on planning since they had to plan the lessons, purchase supplies, conduct the activity and keep the kid busy during the activity time. That was a real surprise for them.

Adult volunteers, Karen and Rick Best, Denise Collins, Sheri Thompson and Jill Luthie attended as adult supervisors. As parents of campers, it was difficult, at times, to let go and allow the counselors to take charge. And the counselors really did.
Months of planning and coordination between youth in two counties paid off. The campers had a blast. The volunteers and I enjoyed a smooth week providing encouragement with minimal disciplinary guidance needed. Everyone was so busy having fun. The week held many lessons for youth and adults.

There are still opportunities for local youth to participate in 4-H camp this summer. Camp Ocala is sponsoring two more Environmental EdVenture camps open for any youth, July 9-14 and July 23-28. For about $35 a day, youth can have a week of tons of fun in the forest. Youth ages 8 to 13 years can swim, canoe, snorkel at Alexander Springs, play and sing.

Older teens can sign up for a natural resources theme camp at our Timpoochee 4-H Center in the Florida Panhandle. Participants learn about forest ecology, wildlife, trees and forest management for only $20 for the entire week. It costs more than that to feed a teenager for a day!

Don't let a child miss out on these opportunities. Contact the Osceola County Extension Service for camp registration information.

You can also help a local child attend camp by making a tax deductible donation to our Osceola County 4-H Foundation. Call (321) 697-3000 for more information. Your investment in our youth will pay benefits to our community for years to come.

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Date: June 15th, 2000