Building Resilience with Equine-Based Youth Programs

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Mitacs

CANADA 4-H Ontario

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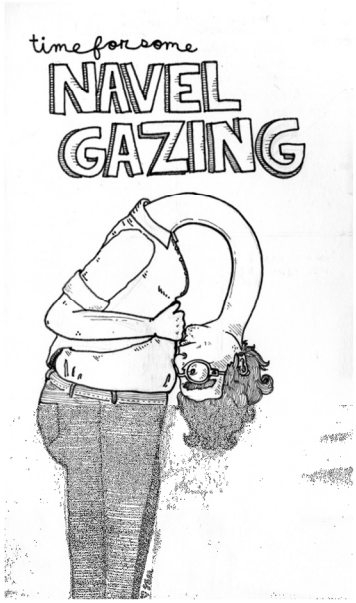
To ensure the future of the horse industry, we have to stop focusing on horse business,



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Look at North America's mistakes: don't go there.

& understand how
we can help people.

What we bring to
the table other than
need for customers.

Because people care about, and protect,
what they value.
They cannot value what they don't know.

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I started with Life Questions

- Why are so many youth struggling when there is so much therapy knowledge and health options available?
- Why is there a wellbeing deficit in rural areas when they are ABUNDANT in things that make people healthy? (green, animals, social connection)

From a Sport Perspective

- We have a huge sport system- why does it not help the majority?
- When does sport REALLY make better people ? *(hardly anyone will be seriously competitive)*
- Why are we asking 'how do we get girls to play hockey', instead of 'what do they like to do instead?

Equine Activity Questions

- If horse activity is so powerful for serious therapeutic need, why can't it be used for health promotion? *(Especially where horses are available and part of culture.)*
- If therapy research shows that benefit is regardless of therapist or therapy approach…then how can horse (and other animal) activity be used in the community?

(affordable for all)

Equine world cannot afford myopia

- Aging horse owner demographic
- Lower numbers = rising expense, smaller market: ***unless broad base of children and society engage we will lose***

Contemporary society needs:

- Sedentariness and mental health epidemic
  - Canada 25/30 OECD countries for child wellbeing
  - Rural areas worse: higher mental & physical health problem
    - Nature deficit

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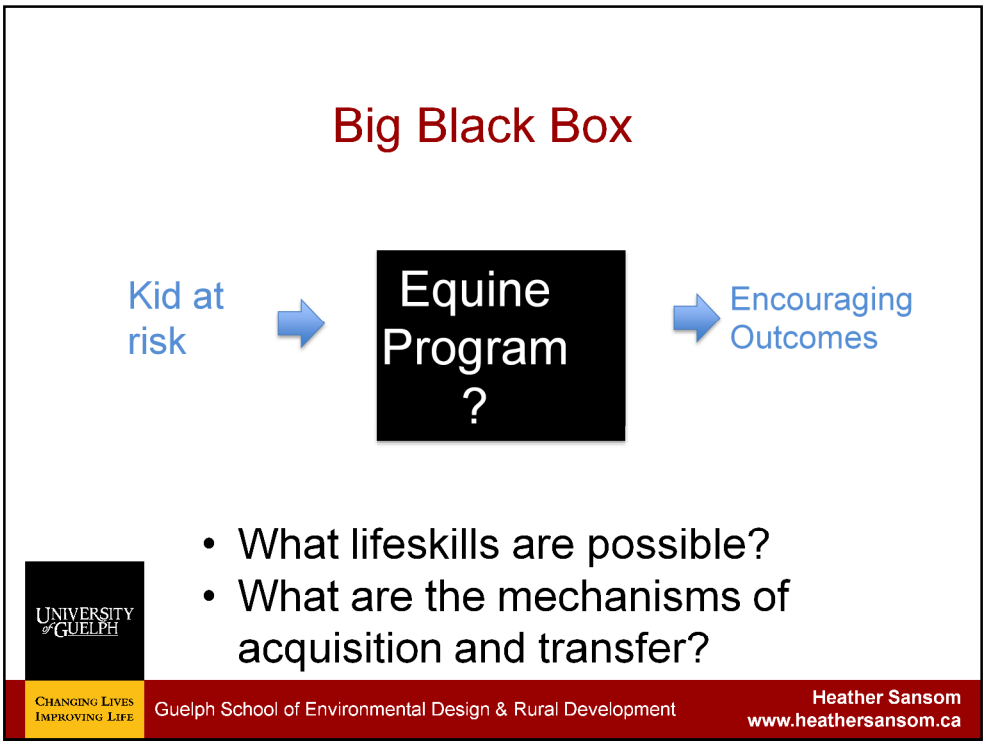
Business model has to change: aiming at elite with money is reducing 'market'; aging demographic middle aged and above horse owners (almost 96% middle aged female in Canada)

Equine industry used to messaging to itself, but has to get out of that bubble and get much better at messaging and creating intro experiences for the totally non initiated, based on what THEY need, not what YOU want to sell

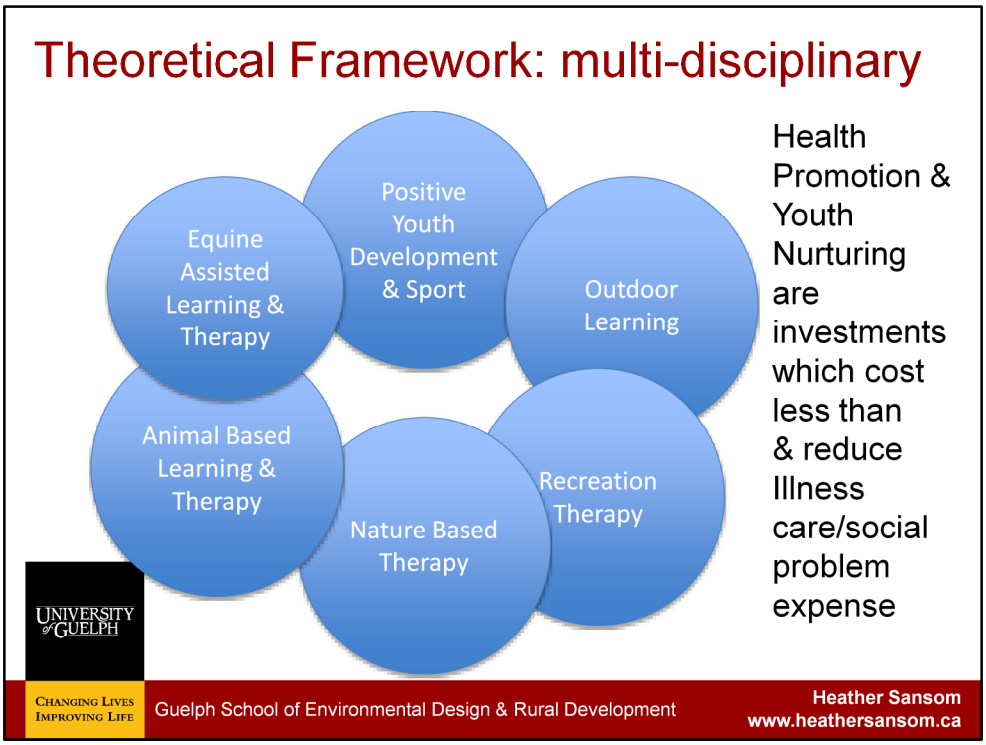
Equine Activity: Strengths and Gaps

- Documented psycho-social and emotional benefits across large variety
- Small case study critique
- Often in silo
- Pathology focus, narrow screens mismatch between research method and data available
- BLACK BOX: theory leaps, not explanations

?

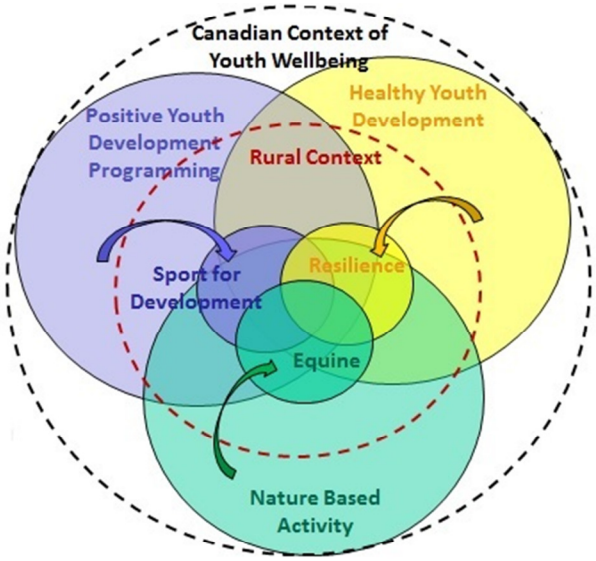


However there are ample explanations from outdoor adventure learning, recreation therapy, sport for development- no need to stay stuck



In Canada an organizaiton called High Five offers training to parks and recreation staff and kids camp leaders on incorporating positive youth development in recreational activity- but there's still no systemic training of coaches to be facilitators of youth dev first, sport second

My Research Framework



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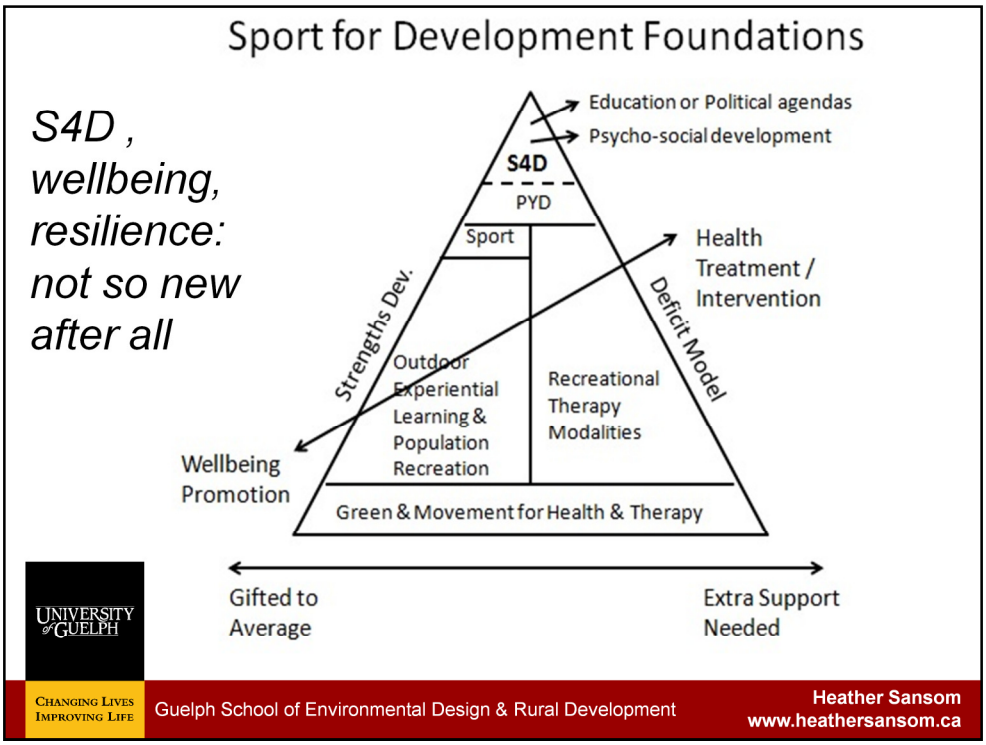

S4D ideas have a rich and deep tradition which has tools in it …

before physical activity was co-opted by 'sport'

Long tradition of Physical Activity for personal dev.

example: Scouts, Outward Bound, 4H

Physical activity in green space popular in Scandinavia

(extensive use of farm spaces & activities: Grøn Omsorg/ GreenCare)

Psychology:

Gestalt (psycho-somatic links)

Positive Youth Development

- Caring adult
- Engaging activity
- Resilience

Sport & Positive Youth Development: Key Ideas

- Intentional facilitation of life skill acquisition needed: sport can also be negative
- Any activity will do: sport skill should not be focus
- Engagement in variety, over time = best
- Critical factors:
  - adult supportive/collaborative leadership,
  - connection to community
  - Opportunity to try, fail, try again, be successful
  - Physical movement benefits cognitive

Outdoor Learning & Recreation Therapy: Key Ideas

- Lessons and lifeskills personal to each participant
- Kolb's learning cycle: Previous experience/liking for activity not necessary
- Medium is a facilitator; technical skill not important
- Getting out of office/comfort zone essential
- Peers/animals = co-therapists/teachers sometimes more important than therapist/leader
- Leadership = mastery of self, co-operative

  not hierarchical, even therapist/leader

  is 'alongside with'

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My observation that it makes no sense to try and organize equine activity research in quasi experimental method or with hopes of quantitative generalization to the population, because participants can be expected to have different outcomes

Better to look for common threads in a backdrop of variety- 'too many variables'

Nature Therapy Key Ideas

- Attentional Focus Restoration
  (hyper sensory stimulus without need to filter)
- Phytoncides impacting neuro-chemicals (forest bathing)
- Creativity /proprioception / physical self acceptance promotive

Animal / Equine Activity Key Ideas

- Animal a stand-in for human relationship skills and capacities
- Skills transfer to human relationships
- Attachment theory
- Emotional self-regulation
- Acceptance
- Care for other/ care for self
- Encounter with the unknown

Specific Focus LifeSkills for Challenging Times:
Resilience & Self-Efficacy

Resilience:

capacity, not state,
ecological, not individual alone
asset, not deficit/pathology approach
dynamic, about navigating to wellbeing resources that exist and which you CAN access ***Liebenberg & Ungar***

- CYRM-28: 3 subscales:
  - Individual (peers, personal, social skill)
  - Caregiver relationship
  - Context (cultural, education, spiritual)

Self-Efficacy: self esteem with legs & direction

Directional: one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task.
Albert Bandura

Personal Impact: you see a goal & a way *for you;* believe if you act it can be effective

(self esteem with competence and direction)

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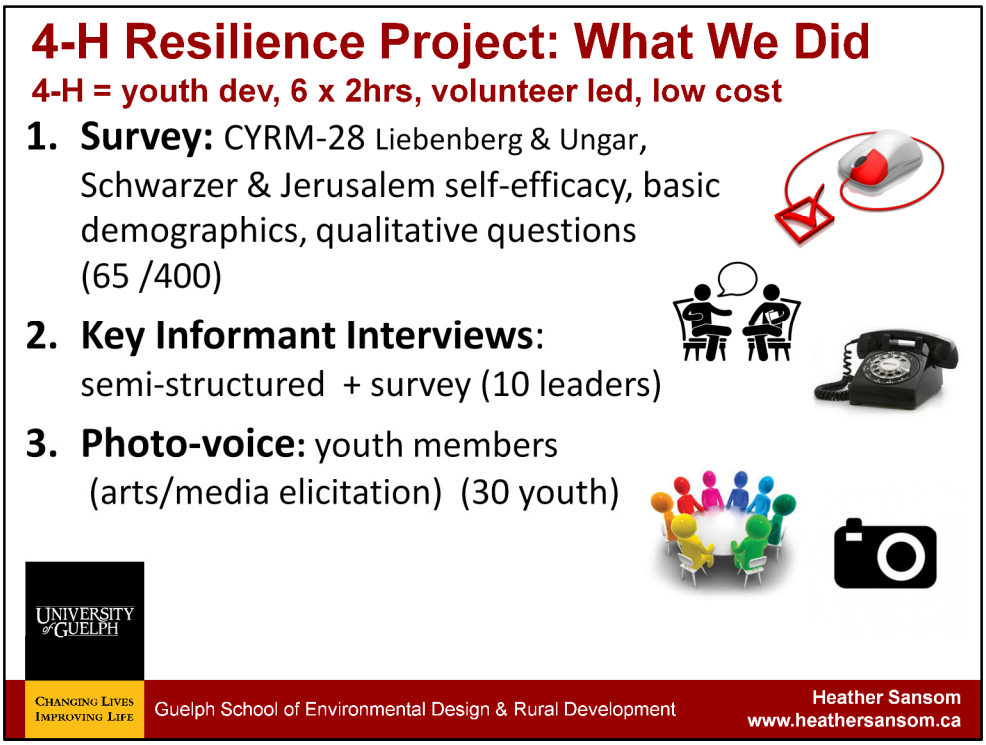

Needed to use a consistent lens across both qual and quant data

Welcome to the farm….
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Other species: learning about differences

Irony of north american urban consumer culture; it doesn't promote thinking differently, or understanding meaningful differences (how we think and do things)

Club Types: all different

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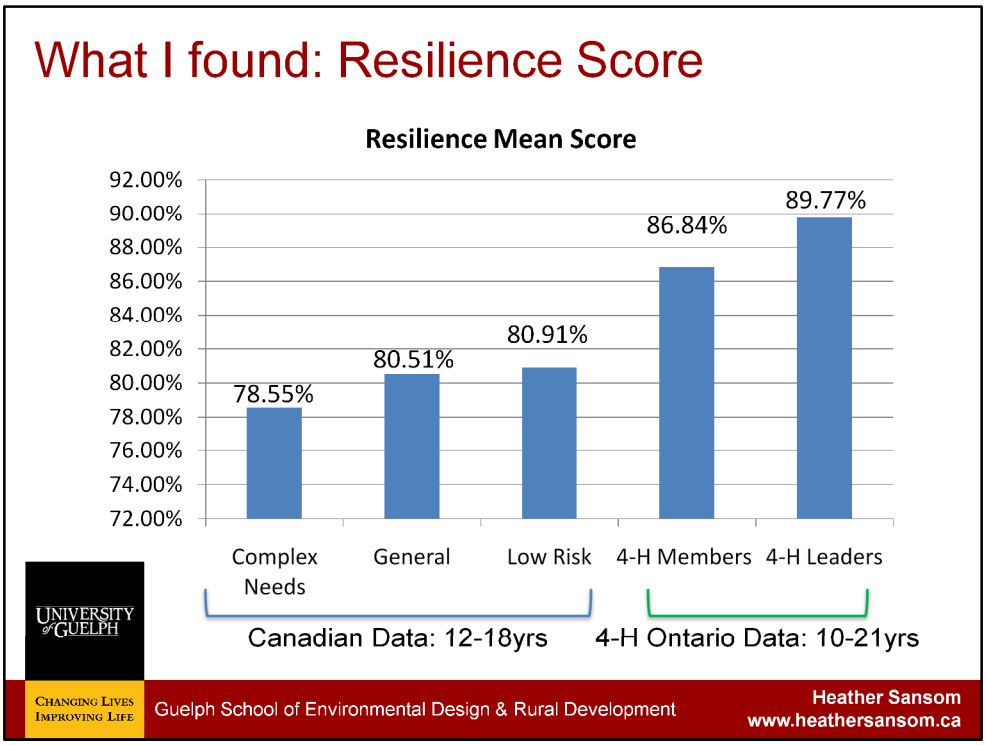
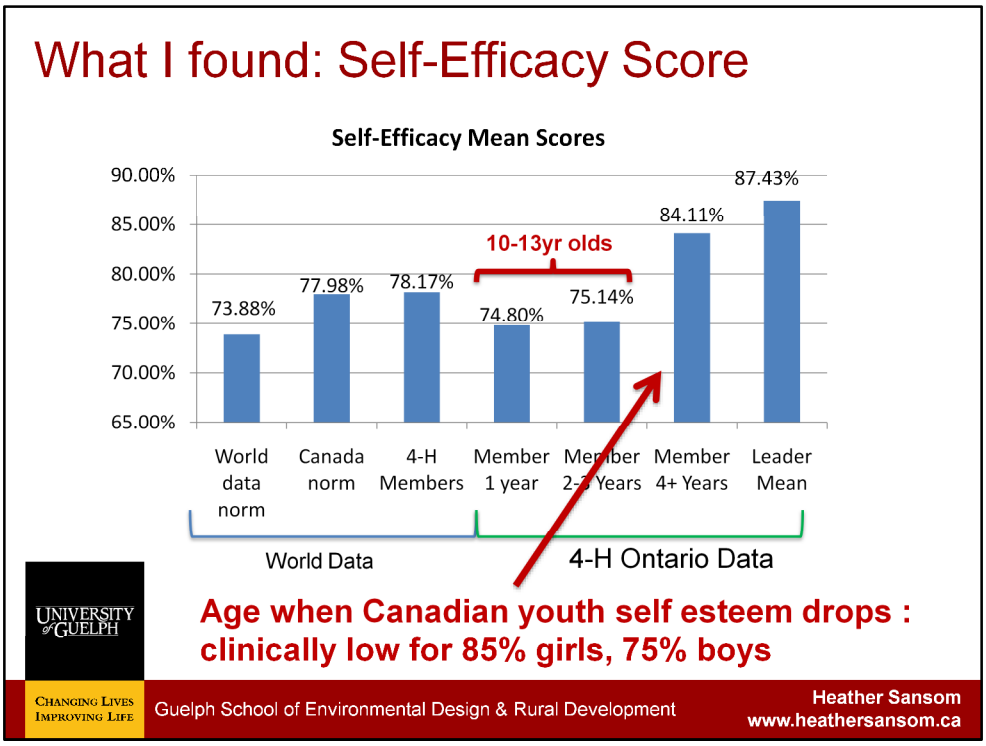


Resilience Scale 3 subscales, and sub sub scales

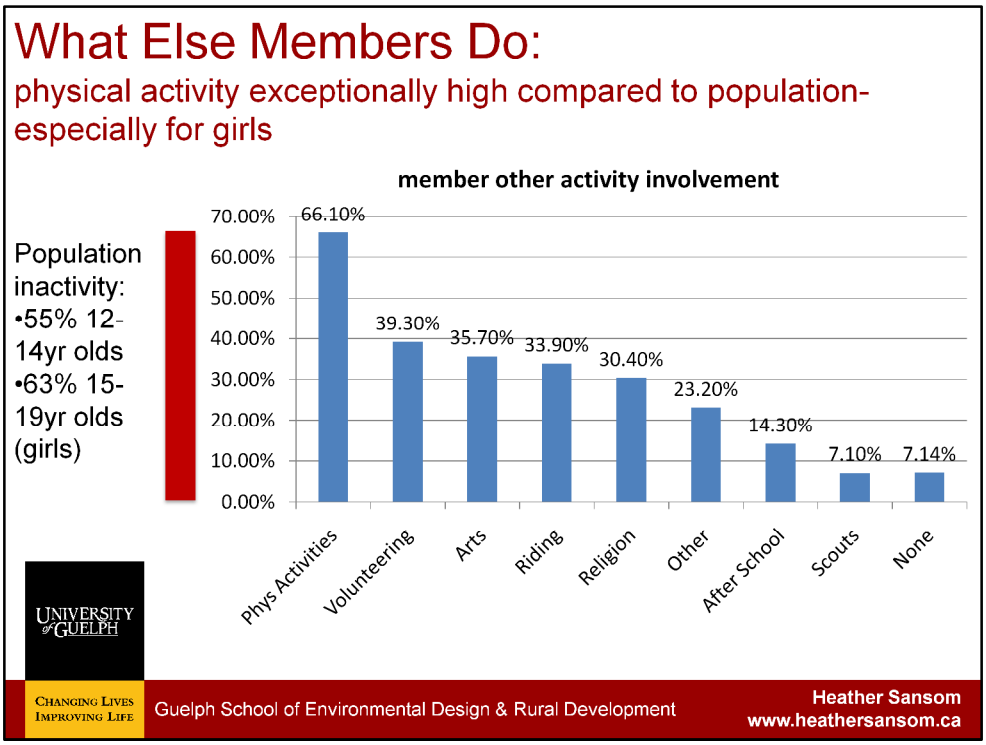
Individual: personal, social, peer relationships

Caregiver Relationship

Context: spirituality, education, culture



The sample size is not huge, but this is significant enough given there was no data..it is clinically significant if not statistically significant



66.10 percent involved in phys activity: phys activity doesn't seem to make a difference on resilience score

Remember most of these are girls!

Do you know any population of girls where 66% engage in regular organized physical activity? The national average is 55% girls 12-14 and 63% girls 15-19 classified as inactive (less than half an hour moderate activity per day).

Estimated 7% of kids /youth meet daily physical activity requirements.

Data Strength

- Self-Efficacy and Resilience = .908 correlation
- Survey supported by leader & youth interviews
- Leader & youth interviews consistent across variety of locations and activity types

Some Important Symbols
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Play audio footage

Evidence: Resilience & LifeSkills

- **Teamwork**
- Turned on to **lifelong learning** (from people and other sources)
- **Work Ethic** & **Attitude** 'Smile no matter what'
- Favourable Job Applications/ Teen **Job Opps**
- Identify and Practice **Skills and Strengths**; later **aspirations**
- **Confidence**, '**can do**'/believe have support
- **Belonging**: extended family, 'real' friends, place in community
- **Leadership**: master self, teach others, join boards, take initiative, 'power to' not 'power over', negotiate solution

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Leadership studies often look for the number of excellers

Those aren't the ones we are concerned about

Mechanisms for Life Skill Acquisition

- Group: Older **teen mentors, FRIENDS, FUN, experience otherness**
- **Supported hands-on challenge** out of comfort zone, with team
- **Healthy environment**: interact, no cells
- **Other**: species, regions, away from home, different leader views
- **Community engagement**: field trips, guest speakers
- **Animals & judging** promote executive functioning: regulate emotion, own opinion, learning attitude, healthy boundaries, high expectations
- **Speaking** & '**competition**': speak up, public affirmation, high expectations evaluation on personal mastery

What didn't matter:

- Farm or urban/suburban dweller
- Very rural or urban-proximate club
- Size of animal
- Owned or borrowed animal
- Type of activity (riding, not riding, big, small animal)
- Age, gender, IQ, disability/ability
- Other activities: ie: sports, other riding lessons
  *(religion/spirituality slight difference)
- Benefits definitely no involvement of psychotherapist

What Does Matter

- Attitude/presence of leader/volunteers
- Ongoing reinforcement leadership, high expectations
- Specific tasks: speak in public, 'judge'
- Exposure: time/accessing other opportunities
- Everyone counts, everyone does, diversity of views; Inclusion, Space to learn experientially, in group
- Animal interaction: specifically *relationship*
- Access regardless of income/family structure
  - Family: original support, or sense 'this is my family'

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Leadership values, but also what leadership means in interpersonal situations, the challenges of training and showing off the animal;

Listen for Yourself: Leader Audio Clips

Other Typical Stories I Heard:

- Painfully shy kids confident to speak/compete
- Youth with disabilities, overcome; discover strengths, go to college
- Youth from broken families fit in
- University scholarships, job offers

Who defines Beautiful? Happy? Healthy?

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Horses: a portal, if not career

- Access to mentorship, peer, community
- Other species, empathy for nature/agriculture
- Discovery of strengths
- Intentional lifeskill facilitation critical, does NOT need to be a therapist or involve high equestrian skill
- Good for horses: Non competitive horses, horses on 'off' day

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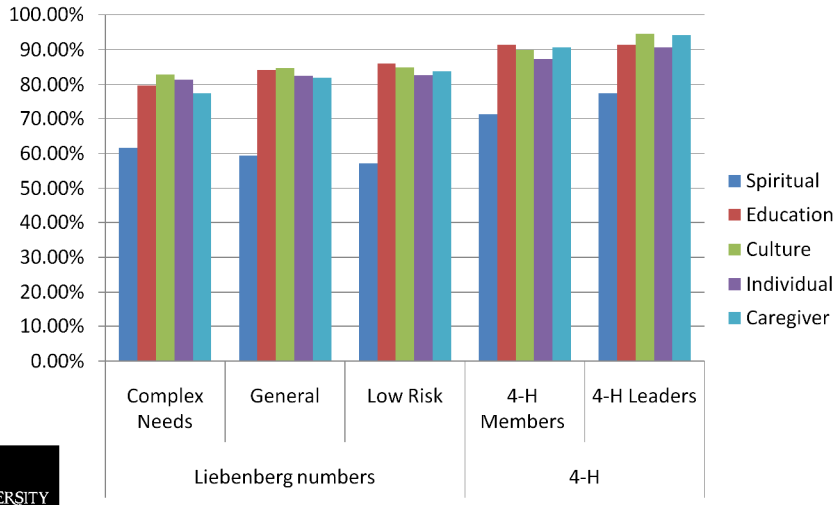
It's not that 4-H is the right answer everywhere; it's that there are components of what is being done that can be learned from; why reinvent the wheel when you don't have to; when there is an organization quietly building resilience through horses right under our nose

Bonus Slides: Resilience Breakdown



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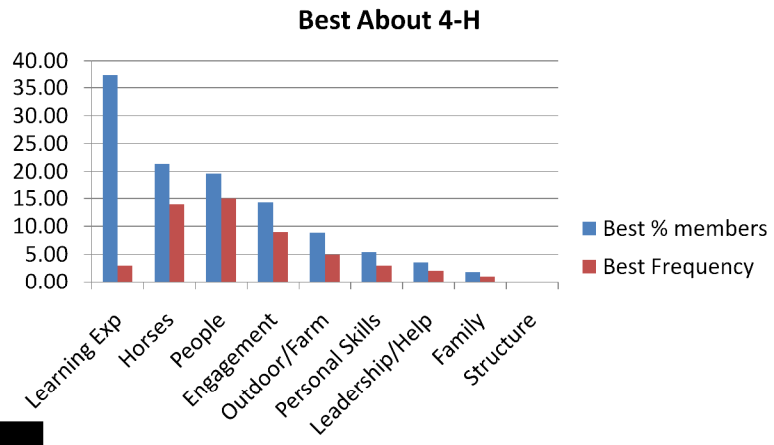
Slide for 4-H: What's Best About 4-H



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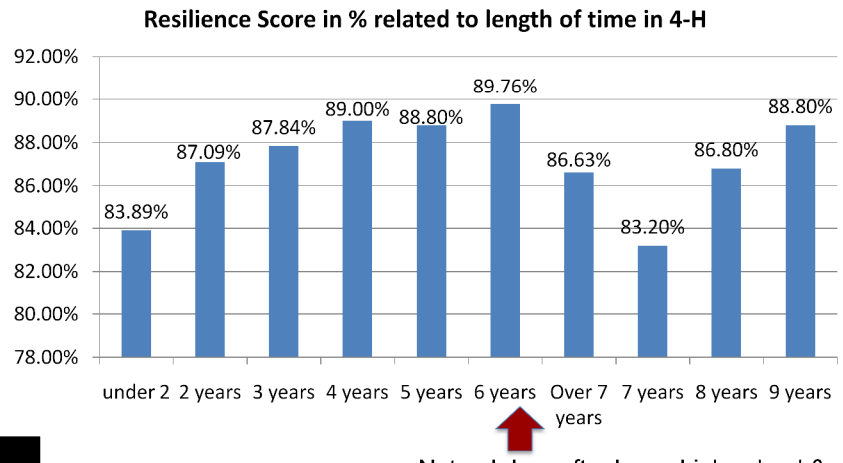
Slide for 4-H: Exposure



Natural drop after leave high school & go to uncharted world of post-secondary/life away

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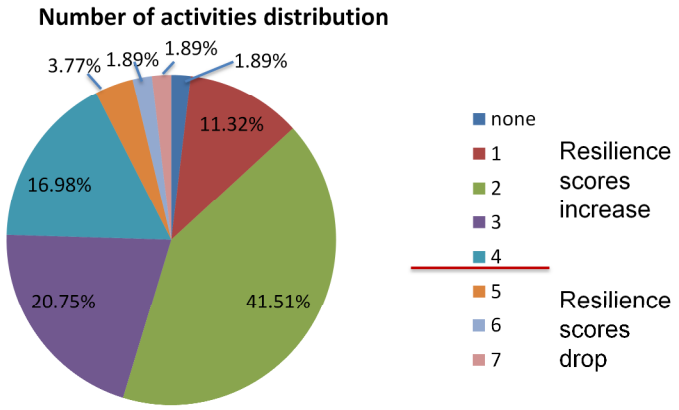
Slide for 4-H: number of other activities



- Note: resilience scores increased with more activity up to 4, and with more 4-H meetings up to a point: then there were diminishing returns (more isn't always better. Overprograming has a negative impact.)

Clips for 4-H

- Meaning quotes from members
- Drill team girls on foot
- Drill team girls at Fair

Farm/Green Activity Valuable Asset in Urbanizing World

- Urban populations need nearby green recreation suitable and inclusive
- Need to Rethink social investment: People who need the most, cannot afford therapy/expensive leisure
- Prevention / health promotion = lower cost than later illness care/social cost
- Society cannot afford gross socio-economic gaps determining health (and productivity)

Rurality = Adversity

- Lower income
- Lower Wellbeing: mental, physical
- Municipalities can't afford specialized services for all the subset of need;
  - therefore integration /inclusion important

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And not just in first nations communities- worse the more rural you get

Best Rural Assets for Resilience

- People- *everyone* can be a positive contributor
- Collaborative civic engagement
- Green infrastructure & diversity:
  (Green space & other species)
- Culturally and locally relevant, sustainable activity

  horses !- bridge role unlike other livestock because capture imagination

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Horses are not the only species: other green care activities, also in another community, another animal might be more culturally relevant, but where there is a tradition of horses, horses have a valuable role