

Guidelines for College-age Youth/Adults at 4-H Events

Young adults who are no longer eligible for senior 4-H activities but may not have reached 21 years of age often are seeking opportunities to serve in leadership roles with 4-H activities and programs. Often these young people bring youthful enthusiasm, a more direct link to the young people in the program, and are seen as mentors and guides. While this can be a winning combination for program participants and planners, questions arise concerning critical thinking and decision making skills and appropriateness of having youth who recently served side by side as co-participants as chaperones and disciplinarians of youth. Specifically, the question has been raised at what age can a legal adult (over 18 years of age) serve as a 4-H adult volunteer?

This response has been formulated to serve as a guide in making decisions realizing that just as all youth are not equal in experience and maturity neither are all young adults. Staff is encouraged to use this as a guide, to seek input from either the 4-H Program Development Coordinator and/or the State 4-H Specialist coordinating the event in determining if someone is “old enough” to serve as chaperone, leader, mentor or coach.

The first consideration in answering the question is the age of the young people he/she will work with. In most cases, a volunteer who is charged with disciplining and chaperoning youth should be at least three years older than the oldest young person in the group. For example, if your volunteer is serving as a chaperone for 4-H Fall Forum, senior 4-H'ers may be 18 years old; therefore, in most cases, chaperones should be 21 years of age.

In conjunction with the age of the young people and the age of the potential volunteer is the role that volunteer will play. A judging team coach that prepares content and information for practice but has another individual serving as disciplinarian and/or chaperone for the event may be just a year older than the 4-H'ers coaching. In fact, senior 4-H'ers often coach each other. These coaching roles require less chaperone responsibility and more content oriented information. If the role for the volunteer involves disciplining youth, assessing safety and appropriateness, and may have the volunteer working primarily on his/her own, the guidelines of three years older than the oldest youth is recommended. Keep in mind for district and statewide overnight events if

you bring an adult as a volunteer he/she will be treated like a chaperone regardless of how many adults you bring with you. We would assume that he/she is prepared to serve in that overnight role. Because of this the three years older is recommended.

Another consideration may be more difficult to judge and it is the perception of the potential volunteer by the young people to be served. Often youth will see someone as older and “more in charge” if he/she is not from their home county. 4-H’ers may have a harder time accepting direction from the teammate who earlier that year slept in the same back room of the cabin as they did and was the same silly teen that they were. While this can be difficult to assess, it should be considered.

Realizing that some young adults by level of experience and maturity are able to serve in a chaperone role prior to the three year mark and in many cases may be employees of the UGA and by virtue of employment assigned to work an event, the three years is a guide. In any case, when someone over the age of 18 supervises youth in Extension service programming, he/she must complete the [screening requirements](#) prior to supervising youth. Additionally, as in the case with all adults serving as overnight chaperones, *Georgia 4-H Chaperone Training* is required. Furthermore, this young adult would be considered a legal adult and would follow all the rules and guidelines including behavioral expectations for adults working with youth. This includes completing the [Extension Volunteer Agreement](#) with an appropriate approved role description.

Often college age 4-H’ers work events and activities in behind the scenes roles. They may run the concession stand, help set up for the event or serve as man power during the weekend. These young people should be supervised by a staff member who is insuring that the young person is actively engaged in the function of the event but not with the youth at the event. While these young adults may be closer in age to the 4-H’ers at the event because their roles are not of supervision or discipline but rather staffing the event, then work ethic, maturity, and need are factors in determining who will be asked to staff an event. Just as with other volunteers, the [Extension Volunteer agreement](#) and appropriate approved role description is needed.

While this is not all inclusive, these guidelines are designed to help insure that those volunteering with 4-H are given skill and experience appropriate roles, are prepared to handle the tasks assigned with limited and no supervision and provide for the safety of youth in the program.