

Section 2: What is 4-H?

4-H is the youth component of the nationwide Cooperative Extension System that promotes the intellectual, social, emotional and physical development of school-age youth.

The simplistic definition given above identifies 4-H's parent organization and its ultimate purpose but does not begin to capture the richness or complexity of the 4-H Youth Development Program. As a 4-H leader you are involved in what is probably the best known aspect of 4H, the 4-H Club Program. With community support and a high degree of parental involvement the 4-H club brings adults and youth together in settings and activities that are ideally suited to foster positive youth development in a comprehensive manor. However, Cooperative Extension also supports other 4-H programs that focus on one or more aspects of youth development in a variety of other settings including camps, school-age childcare facilities, schools, and community youth organizations of many kinds.

All 4-H programs are based on youth development principals established through research done by the land grant Universities that are united within the Cooperative Extension System and by other institutions that focus academic attention on human development. In addition, New York State's 4-H programs are designed to accomplish this mission: ***Cornell Cooperative Extension 4-H Youth Development creates supportive learning environments in which diverse youth and adults reach their fullest potential as capable, competent, and caring citizens.***

Youth Development Principles

To fully understand 4-H Youth Development, you have to understand what nearly 30 years of research tell us about the transitions of young people into adulthood - to do that requires a different question, one that shapes the purposes and the practices of all 4-H Youth Development programs - **What does it take to assist young people to become healthy, problem-solving, constructive adults?**

Young [people] on an effective developmental path must:

- Find a valued place in a constructive group.
- Learn how to form close, durable human relationships.
- Earn a sense of worth as a person.
- Achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices.
- Express constructive curiosity and exploratory behavior.
- Find ways of being useful to others.
- Believe in a promising future with real opportunities.
- Cultivate the inquiring and problem-solving habits of the mind necessary for life-long learning and adaptability.
- Learn to respect democratic values and responsible citizenship.
- Build a healthy lifestyle.

From the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995: *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century*. Concluding report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

What makes 4-H Different?

Many youth organizations strive to promote positive youth development but 4-H does it in a unique way. In addition to the Cooperative Extension System that supports 4-H through research and tax dollars, it is the combination of methods, relationships and environments that create the 4-H experience. These essential elements are described below. It is easy to see how these elements relate to the youth development principles stated above.

1. **A positive relationship with a caring adult** - A caring adult acts as an advisor, guide and mentor. The adult helps set boundaries and expectations for young people. The adult could be called supporter, friend and advocate. [The 4-H leader]
2. **A safe environment - physically and emotionally** - Youth should not fear physical or emotional harm while participating in a 4-H experience whether from the learning environment itself, adults, other participants or spectators. [The 4-H Club and other 4-H program settings]
3. **Opportunity for mastery** - Mastery is the building of knowledge, skills and attitudes and then demonstrating the competent use of this knowledge and skills in the manner of a proficient practitioner. The level of mastery is dependent on the developmental ability of the individual child or youth. The development of mastery is a process over time. [Sequential 4-H project work]
4. **Opportunity to value and practice service for others** - Finding one's self begins with losing yourself in the service of others. Service is a way for members to gain exposure to the larger community, indeed the world itself. [4-H community service activities]
5. **Opportunity for self-determination** - Believing that you have impact over life's events rather than passively submitting to the will and whims of others is self-determination. Youth must exercise a sense of influence over their lives, exercising their potential to become self-directing, autonomous adults. [The 4-H business meeting run by club officers, project selection and carry through]
6. **An inclusive environment (encouraging, affirming, belonging)** - An inclusive environment is one that creates a sense of belonging, encourages and supports its members with positive and specific feedback. Healthy groups celebrate the success of all members - taking pride in the collective efforts of all. [The 4H "family" at the club level, county level and beyond]
7. **Opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future** - The ability to see oneself in the future is to harness hope and optimism, to shape life choices and to facilitate the transition into participating in the future. [The 4-H experiential learning model emphasizes future application - do, reflect, apply. See pages 5-1 and 5-2.]
8. **Engagement in learning** - An engaged youth is one who is mindful of the subject area, building relationships and connections in order to develop understanding. Through self-reflection, youth have the ability to self-correct and learn from experience. The engaged learner has a higher degree of self-motivation and an inexhaustible capacity to create. [The 4-H experiential learning model emphasizes reflection - do, reflect, apply. See pages 5-1 and 5-2.]

As you work with your members, their parents and other volunteers to plan and carry out your club's program you want to make sure that all these elements are included. An easy way to do that is to keep the four H's in mind:

Head - 4-H members pledge their heads to clearer thinking because the ability to think, to plan and to reason enables them to achieve *independence* of thought and action. They are far less influenced by peer pressure when they have confidence in their ability to think things through and arrive at their own conclusions and decisions that guide their independent actions. That assuredness also enables them to lead others in positive ways.

- * Are your members gaining knowledge and understanding? (engagement in learning, mastery)
- * Are they planning and making decisions? (self-determination)

Heart - 4-H members pledge their hearts to greater loyalty because feeling connected to others in a group creates a sense of physical and emotional safety. The warm feeling of *belonging* frees them to relate comfortably with others, to test their ideas without fear of ridicule, to cooperate and help others.

- * Do your members think of their leaders and one another as friends they can look to for support? (positive relationships with adults, inclusive environment, emotionally safe environment)
- * Do all the adults who cooperate in the leadership of your club know and follow youth protection guidelines? (physically safe environment)

Hands - 4-H members pledge their hands to larger service because they need to feel that their lives have meaning and purpose. Using skills they have learned to help others meets that need while developing a spirit of *generosity*. The desire to help one's neighbor lies at the very core of citizenship.

- * Have your members developed skills they can apply? (mastery, opportunity for service)
- * Are they involved in community service activities? (opportunity to value and practice service)

Health - 4-H members pledge their health to better living because their ability to achieve their goals and enjoy their lives depends on having healthy minds and bodies. Successes achieved through 4-H project work build a sense of *mastery* that in turn nurtures a positive self-concept, the prime ingredient of emotional health. When we think we can, we try, and eventually we do succeed again.

- * Have your members developed "can-do" attitudes? (see themselves as active participants in the future)
- * Does your club program promote healthy lifestyles? (mastery of physical skills and content of related projects such as nutrition)

Does Participation in a 4-H Club Really Make a Difference?

New York 4-H Club Study [1]

This two-year study focused on understanding the difference 4-H club participation makes in a young person's life and the ways in which 4-H clubs influence and contribute to positive youth development in New York State. The results show that the process of youth development is positively influenced in multiple ways by 4-H club membership and that young people who participate in 4-H clubs do better in school, are more motivated to help others, and are developing skills in leadership, public speaking, self-esteem, communication and planning, and are making lasting friendships.

The length of time a youth remains in 4-H was also examined. Statistically significant differences were shown for youth who remain in 4-H for one year or more for the following assets and/or skills: leadership, conflict resolution, communication, self-confidence, ability to make healthy choices, knowledge of nutrition and food safety, and record keeping.

In addition, member responses to the question "What do you feel you have gained from being a 4-H club member?" provided a wealth of rich data upon which to draw conclusions about the difference 4-H club membership makes in a young person's life:

- A strong majority of club members felt they had gained skills that would support them throughout their lives. The majority of club youth reported multiple gains in terms of public speaking, problem solving, goal setting, leadership skills, planning skills, self-confidence, citizenship, communication skills, academic gains, expanded horizons, organizational skills, respect for (and from) others, patience, tolerance, and "real-world" experience from hands-on projects.
- The majority of youth reported that they had developed skills in leadership, public speaking, self-esteem, communication, and planning. Additionally, many youth reported that 4-H club membership had improved their school performance, their ability to make lasting friendships, and their desire to make a difference in their communities.
- Most adults who participated in the study believed that the success of 4-H club members was closely related to active participation and involvement in public demonstrations, community service projects, and county and state fairs. Others believed that the relationships developed in 4-H clubs and long-term membership were the keys to positive outcomes for youth.

I feel that the experience I've gained from being a 4-H member puts me "a notch above the rest." 4-H experiences such as public presentations and educational projects have given me an edge in school. Biology and English seem so much easier when you already know about pond life and how to deliver an oral presentation. My experiences with 4-H community service projects have encouraged my desire to help other people as well as my feelings of self-fulfillment. Most importantly, the leadership experiences that I have had through 4-H have helped me to become a more outgoing person, ready to take on all different sorts of responsibilities.

Comparing 4-H'ers with non-4-H Youth:

The strongest test of the role of 4-H in the lives of youth is to compare 4-H'ers to children who are not members of 4-H. Past studies have shown:

- Participation in 4-H has a positive influence on children's perceptions of their competence, coping, and life skills (study of 666 Ohio public school children). [2]
- 4-H'ers rate themselves higher than non-4-H peers on working with groups, understanding self, communicating, making decisions, and leadership (study of over 300 4-H club members and over 500 non-4-H school children in Texas). [3]
- Within 4-H'ers, more involvement is associated with higher scores on communication, working with groups, and leadership. [3]



Sources of Research Studies:

[1] Mead, June, Hirschl, Thomas, Rodriguez, Eunice, and Goggin, Steve. (1999). Understanding the Difference 4-H Clubs Make in the Lives of New York Youth: How 4-H Contributes to Positive Youth Development.

[2] Miller, Jeffrey P. and Blannie E. Bowen. 1993. "Competency, Coping, and Contributory Life Skills Development of Early Adolescents." *Journal of Agricultural Education*. Spring:68-76.

[3] Boyd, Barry L., Don R. Herring, and Gary E. Briers. 1992. "Developing Life Skills in Youth: How 4-H'ers Perceive their Leadership." *Journal of Extension*. Winter:16-18.