4-H Projects

UNDERSTANDING 4-H PROJECT WORK

A project is a planned series of learning activities/experiences that engage youth in the use of their heads and hands in ways that result in enhanced competencies, open hearts and better health.

4-H projects give youth opportunities to:

- gain new knowledge and develop the critical thinking skills that lead to independence of thought and action.
- experience a sense of belonging through cooperative learning activities.
- develop a spirit of generosity by sharing knowledge and using skills to help others.
- achieve a feeling of mastery as the cumulative result of project work.

4-H projects always teach the "why's" as well as the "how's." For example: a member enrolled in a woodworking project might learn the safe and most effective way to use basic hand tools and gain experience in the selection of hardware and finishing materials while making a birdhouse (tangible product). The knowledge and skills learned (intangible product) can be applied when making other wooden items in the future. It is this transferable knowledge and skill that is the essence of the project—not just the finished product.

A project will not always result in a tangible product but may lead solely to an intangible result (for example, learning a CPR technique). In either case a learn-by-doing approach is used. The 4-H "learning by doing" method involves several steps in a process: doing, and then thinking, planning, and often doing again. Such learning is called experiential learning (see the "Experiential Learning Model") and is a powerful approach for young people to develop a variety of life skills.

The experiential learning approach starts with a concrete activity – something for us to DO. Following the concrete activity we REFLECT on what we have experienced. Ask the members "what?" questions such as "What happened?" and "What was that like for you?" or "What did you observe?"

Next we need to help the members generalize the concepts formed through this experience so that they can APPLY their learning to future real-life situations. To do this, we first ask "So what?" questions such as "So, what made it easier or harder for you?" and "So what are the key learnings from this activity?". Finally, we ask, "Now what?" and "Now that I know this, what do I do next?"

Through the experiential learning approach we help young people develop the characteristics and abilities that will allow them to grow into mature, productive and contributing citizens. In the 4-H Youth Development program, such characteristics and abilities are referred to as "Life Skills."

"Project skills" focus on mastery of skills to complete a tangible project, whereas "life skills" are important for youth development. As they apply to 4-H project work life skills:

- Are intermeshed with subject matter learning.
- Help young people meet their needs of belonging, independence, mastery and generosity in positive ways.
- Are developed by linking with opportunities to meet youth needs.
- Apply to young people's present lives as well as to their future.
- Are learned when adults model the skill, young people have the chance to try, practice, and rehearse the skill for themselves, and get feedback and reinforcement on their efforts.
- Frequently rely on a body of knowledge as well as personal attributes.
- Are transferable. That is, once a skill is acquired, it can be used in many ways and in different areas of life.

As caring adults, we want to meet children's needs. We want to help youth learn how to meet their own needs in positive ways and to develop life-long skills and competencies. This is the purpose of 4-H project work.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR LEARNING

The 4-H Club setting enhances the benefits of project participation by providing a positive learning environment. To help create a positive learning environment for your 4-H members keep the following in mind:

- Young people learn best in an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance.
- Members must have clear, self-determined goals.
- Each youth has different abilities. The same learning method will not be equally successful with all members.
- Learning requires motivation. Self-motivation comes from basic needs, personal preferences, and feelings of self-worth and belonging. External motivation is based on incentives and awards received from others.
- Youth must be actively involved in selecting and carrying out the learning activities.
- Self-evaluation (that is, the member's own assessment of his/her achievement and what is needed to "make the best better") is the most meaningful kind of evaluation.

It is important to remember that while the printed project guides outline a variety of planned learning experiences and activities, the leader also needs to recognize, create and build on "teachable moments."

Try these methods to enhance project learning:

- Encourage inquisitiveness, show where and how to find answers to questions
- Brainstorm creative solutions
- Ask questions

- Encourage members to become more independent, and make their own decisions
- Encourage individual expression within the group
- Use a short, simple demonstration or illustrated talk
- Involve members in role playing
- Arrange a tour of personal interest to members (example a food tour which shows where things come from or how they are used, etc.)
- Combine teaching methods that allow members to use all five senses
- Praise and reward good work, interest, cooperation and the acceptance of responsibility
- Avoid overly competitive situations
- Avoid comparing efforts of one child to another
- As appropriate, use games during meetings to increase energy level and fun

PROJECT SELECTION

County, state and national 4-H resources are available for a wide array of projects that are categorized within 8 broad program areas. Often these materials are designed in sets including a leader's guide and youth guide(s) for members of a specific age group. The meeting plans suggested in the leader guides combine activities intended to foster the development of life skills while teaching information and practical skills related to a particular program area. Most of the leader guides provide a selection of activities within an individual lesson so that you can tailor the meeting plan to the needs and interests of your members, the time available and the meeting place. The activities are based on research related to both human development and the subject matter. They have also been "kid tested" – so, you can be sure they will work well. While you are welcome to incorporate your own ideas and use your own creativity, you are advised to rely on these pre-tested 4-H materials for the bulk of your club program.

Every 4-H member is required to complete at least one project each year. Some projects will be done by your whole club while others are selected by individual members. In either case, success is dependent on the developmental appropriateness of the project for each member. Past experience is also an important factor. A beginner project introduces the most basic information and skills in a particular category. Each project that follows will build on what was learned in the previous project. For example, in the first year of the woodworking project, a nine-year-old member would make a simple wooden game that requires only sanding and finishing a flat piece of wood. The next project would introduce the use of one or two hand tools, the next some construction techniques. If the member continues with the woodworking project until the age of 16, he or she should be able to design and build a piece of furniture. However, a 16-year-old member who just started the woodworking project could not begin to make furniture.

Therefore members should be presented with only those options that are appropriate for their age and experience. In addition, leaders should consider the cost of materials, workspace required and adult assistance available before presenting options to members.

As members become older and more experienced, a club leader should encourage them to take on greater responsibility and enjoy freedom in selecting their projects. Teens especially need a voice in decisions that affect them. As the 4-H member grows in knowledge and experience, the leader's role should change gradually from "directorship" to "advisorship."

In selecting projects, a member should think about:

- An interest he or she would like to explore
- A hobby he or she would like to learn more about
- A topic of interest he or she shares with family members
- Something that is fun for the member

A leader or parent can help in the selection process by asking:

1. What do you like most to do?
2. Do you have, or can you get, the necessary equipment and space?
3. Do you have a way to finance your project?
4. Are your parents interested? Does it fit into their plans?
5. Do you have the time you will need for this project?
6. Is the project suited to your age and abilities?
7. Is there a leader who can help you with your work?

4-H members are more likely to complete a project when:

- The project is of real interest to them
- High standards are set for performance
- Youth are involved in planning what they will do to meet standards
- They receive encouragement and complements along the way
- Parents care about 4-H and work with the members at home
- Club meetings are friendly and fun
- Club members feel they belong to an important group with important things to do

PROJECT GOALS

Once a project has been selected, the 4-H member needs to set a GOAL (decide what to do and learn) for the 4-H project. The members already have experience in goal setting from when they planned their club calendar. While the process is the same, an important difference is, project goals are individual, even when several members are working on the same project. Each member should talk about his or her ideas with the leaders, project leaders and/or parent(s). Everyone should understand that it is okay to change the goal(s) or set additional goals during the year. 4-H Goal Writing Worksheet, can be used to help members set project goals.

A variety of learning activities, background information, "how-to" instructions and listings of materials can all be found in the 4-H project guides. The project leader will keep the member's goal(s) in mind while helping him/her to select the most appropriate activities.

PROJECT RECORDS

The project record is the measuring tool members use to see their own progress. It is an integral part of the project and is required for project completion. (Remember: a 4-H member must complete at least one project annually to receive a certificate of achievement.) Some project guides include their own record sheets.

The project record includes a summary of the member's accomplishments and the challenges met while working on the project. It tells whether the member made or lost money (if appropriate). It helps the member to identify what was learned in the project and to reflect on the opportunities provided by the project. In other words, it puts in writing what the member has thought or talked about during the reflection and application phases of the experiential learning process. Additionally, project records are rich sources of testimonials, invaluable for telling the 4-H story to others.

To ensure that the completion of project records will be an effective part of the project learning experience (rather than a burden) 4-H Leaders are advised to:

1. Explain the record at the beginning of the 4-H year so members and parents know what is expected.
2. Check the members' records once in a while and give help in keeping them up-to-date. This can be done at club meetings or project meetings.
3. Instruct members to write down facts when they happen.
4. Help members to finalize their project records right after a project is completed so they do not have to fill them out at the last minute for year-end recognition and evaluation.

Click here for Dairy Project record.

Click here for Horse Project record.

DEVELOPMENT APPROPRIATENESS OF PROJECTS

The developmental appropriateness of projects is of utmost importance. Pushing children to do things for which they are not yet ready creates frustration and leads to failure. Providing only "fool proof" activities that present no challenge results in boredom and misbehavior.

The Leader's Guide (or Helper's Guide) for most 4-H projects will state the age group for which it was designed. Many projects have been developed in a series with each level building on the previous. This enables you to select activities from different levels of the same project to tailor learning experiences for members who are at different levels of development.

While we are discussing child development in terms of age groups, be aware that age alone is not a good predictor of development. Children develop in stages. Each stage is distinct, characterized by abilities, attitudes and priorities that are qualitatively different from those preceding and subsequent stages. But, each child enters and exits a stage on his/her own timetable. Keep this in mind as you compare your members to the information listed in the charts that follow. Encourage youth to select project activities that stretch their current abilities and are still appropriate for their developmental stage.

From kindergarten through high school, youth pass through four developmental stages. The stages are most commonly classified as follows: ages 5-8 (middle childhood), ages 9-11 (late childhood), ages 12-14 (early adolescence), ages 15-18 (middle adolescence).