

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Life Skills Learned in 4-H: An Assessment in Lincoln County

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Introduction

As 4-H approaches its 100th birthday in 2002, land grant universities have an opportunity to reflect upon the role of 4-H in community-based youth development in the 21st century. As one of the first youth development clubs in the US, expectations for 4-H are high. Since 4-H has weathered the test of time, so to speak, it is likely considered a successful youth development program. The anniversary of 4-H provides Cooperative Extension an opportunity to objectively assess how successful 4-H is in reaching, teaching, and effectively developing youth.

In January 2001, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension embarked on a process to assess the 4-H program in the areas of life skill development and program management. The survey was piloted in Lyon County in January. The survey was distributed in Lincoln County in June of the same year. Assessment at the county level is necessary because 4-H programs in Nevada are managed at the county level.

Designing and Conducting the Assessment

In designing a tool to assess 4-H, there are many models of youth development with which 4-H can be compared. One model that has been compared with 4-H is based upon six outcomes to expect from successful youth development. These outcomes are confidence, competence, caring, connection, contributing, and character.

Successful youth development helps children become: *confident* they can make a difference; *competent* through their ability, skills, and knowledge, and; able to work with people in a way that develops and promotes *caring* relationships. These youth *connect* beneficially with people and organizations, *contribute* their services to make a difference in their personal development as well as in their community, and demonstrate responsible and honest *character*, or a sense of who they are.

Another model for youth development programming focuses on "core concepts" established in 1990 by University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Youth Development staff.

The core concepts provide a basis for successful statewide youth development programs. Such programs produce youth who:

- ✓ learn and practice *self-responsibility and social responsibility* to feel accountable and in control of their lives;
- ✓ recognize when and how to *make informed decisions and implement decisions* to solve a problem or achieve goals;
- ✓ *communicate* effectively in both verbal and written form, to share thoughts and feelings which increase social competence, and;
- ✓ obtain career and occupational information to help *prepare for the world of work*.

Questions asked for this assessment are based partly upon the six descriptors discussed above and partly upon Nevada's "core concepts" for teaching life skills. Combining aspects of both models resulted in fifteen questions to assess how well 4-H is effectively teaching life skills to its members. Opportunity was provided for survey participants to comment about what they "like best", "like least", and "would like to change" about Lincoln County 4-H.

Participants in the assessment included all adult volunteer 4-H leaders and the parents of all 4-H members currently enrolled in Lincoln County. These participants were selected based on the rationale that parents of 4Hers and 4H leaders have the most frequent opportunity to observe any changes that occur among youth members participating in 4-H programs.

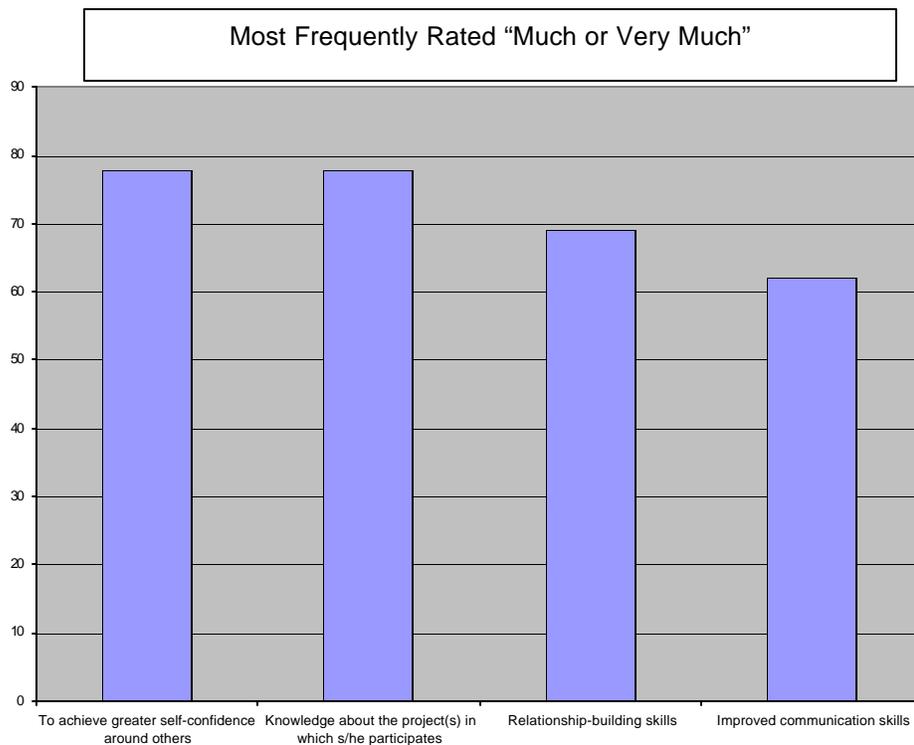
Each individual was mailed a two-page questionnaire with instructions, and a self-addressed and stamped return envelope. Also included was a cover letter that explained the purpose of the survey, ensured confidentiality to participants, and thanked them for their participation. Of the 80 surveys mailed, 13 were returned for a response rate of 16.25%. Although this is an allowable return rate for a mailed survey, small numbers used in statistical analysis must always be cautioned.

Results of the Assessment

On a scale of 1 to 5 with "1" being "very little" and "5" being "very much," respondents were asked to circle the number that best indicates how much their child is learning as a result of 4-H. Respondents were given an opportunity to indicate that they "didn't know." The results were sorted into two groups by combining highest ratings into the top group and the lowest ratings into a second group.

The top life skills are those for which the majority of respondents had indicated their child had learned "much" or "very much." These are illustrated in Table 1. Life skills for which the majority of respondents indicated that their child had learned "little" or "very little" were combined into a second group illustrated in Table 2. The fifteen individual questions are listed below each bar graph to illustrate the percentage responses for each question.

According to the assessment results the top skill learned is *to achieve greater self-confidence around others*. Other top rated skills are: *knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates, relationship-building skills and to acquire greater self-esteem*. Assessment results indicate that life skills targeted for improvement in Lincoln County 4-H include teaching youth about *improved organizational skills, improved public speaking skills, to trust others and be trust worthy, and skills useful in dealing with conflicts*.

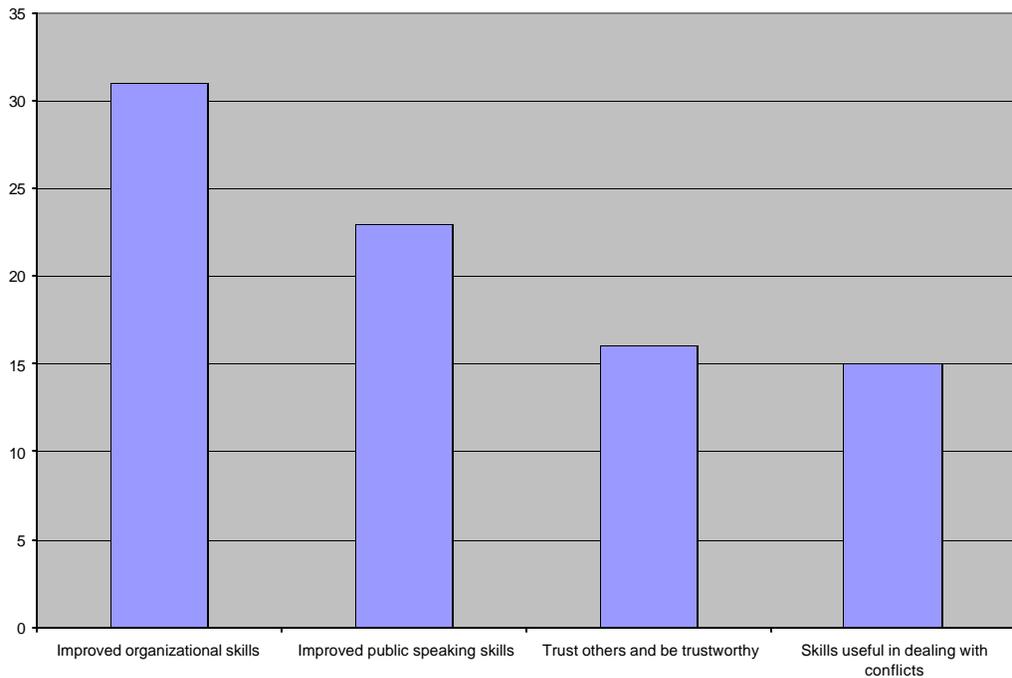


Percent indicating "much" or "very much"

**Percent
Much &
Very Much**

To achieve greater self-confidence around others	78
Knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	78
Relationship-building skills	69
Improved communication skills	62
To acquire greater self-esteem	62
Self-responsibility	62
To trust others and be trustworthy	62
To set and reach goals	54
To value service to the community	54
Improved decision-making ability	46
Improved organizational skills	39
Improved public-speaking skills	39
About future career choices	39
Improved skills to lead peers	24
Skills useful in dealing with conflicts	16

Most Frequently Rated as Learned "Little or Very Little" in 4-H



Percent indicating "little" or "very little"

Percent Little & Very Little

Improved organizational skills	31
Improved public speaking skills	23
To trust others and be trust worthy	16
Skills useful in dealing with conflicts	15
About future career choices	15
Improved communication skills	8
Relationship-building skills	8
To acquire greater self-esteem	8
Improved decision making ability	8
To achieve greater self-confidence around others	8
Self-responsibility	8
Knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	8
To set and reach goals	8
To value service to the community	8
Improved skills to lead peers	0

When asked “whose responsibility is it to see to it that your child gets the most out of 4-H”, the highest percentage of responses (39%) indicated it is the parents’ responsibility followed by volunteer 4-H leaders (31%), with children and extension staff receiving the same number of responses (15%). None of the respondents believed their community was responsible for their child getting the most from 4-H.

In Lincoln County, the majority of respondents indicated that they reside in a rural area (77%) followed by farm (15%). Only 8 percent consider themselves to be urban residents. The majority (92%) indicated that they were white. Over half (69%) reported that as a child, s/he had been a member of 4-H. Only 39 percent of the respondents had never served as a volunteer 4-H leader. Of those respondents who answered this question the average length of time served as a volunteer 4-H leader was 5 years.

Selected Comments

With regards to teaching effectiveness, the following quotes indicate **what respondents liked best about 4-H**:

- *It taught my daughter about beautifying the city of Caliente*
- *Association with other 4-H members, and skills learned in showing animals, etc.*
- *Programs that teach self-esteem through requiring performance and work on the child’s part, i.e. soils, range, wildlife, etc.*
- *To continue interacting with other children, something to look forward to in the summer*
- *Learn constructive things*
- *Diversity*
- *You learn new things and at the same time you’re having fun.*
- *You make new friends*

In contrast, quotes that indicate **what respondents liked least about 4-H** include:

- *Duplication of programs where kids learn about drugs*
- *Children don’t learn enough about responsibility and taking charge of their projects*

When asked **if you could change anything about 4-H what would you change**, selected quotes include:

- *Help kids learn better organizational skills and apply those skills to club meetings*
- *Programs related to the community*
- *Older youth should demonstrate leadership skills in clubs*

Conclusions

To summarize, a pilot assessment of 4-H life skills teaching effectiveness in Lyon County indicated that 4-H is strong in developing youth to achieve greater self-confidence and build their knowledge specific to individual 4-H projects. Additionally the program is strong in life skills that

build relationships and communication skills. Life skills that need attention include organizational skills, public speaking, issues relevant to trust and conflict resolution.

Volunteer leaders and 4-H parents indicate that there are many aspects about 4-H that are well liked including community improvement, the variety of activities, and positive social contacts. Structural changes that 4-H should investigate include examining duplication of programs, developing organizational plans for clubs, and using youth more effectively to lead programs.

A statistical test for content validity and reliability of the pilot questionnaire was very high (97%). This indicates the questionnaire is a reliable and useful assessment tool. Efforts are currently underway to replicate this assessment using this same questionnaire in other counties in Nevada. Once additional data are gathered, Cooperative Extension can further assess 4H programs' effectiveness, including for example, recognizing similarities or differences between urban and rural counties for life skills learned and changes needed. Any changes contemplated for the 4-H program as a result of the assessment must be discussed thoroughly, involving 4-H staff statewide and at the county level. The results of county assessments can be used to begin this process in a positive, objective manner, and to brainstorm ways in which 4-H can *make the best better*.

References

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