

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You

Fact Sheet-01-20

Life Skills Learned in 4-H: A Pilot Study in Lyon County

Loretta Singletary, Extension Educator, Central Area
Marilyn Smith, Northeast Area Youth Development Specialist
William Evans, State Youth Development Specialist

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 conducted a mail survey to assess the success of 4-H in youth development. The survey was piloted in Lyon County. With 1,360 members, Lyon County has the largest 4-H enrollment in Nevada. 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 Lyon 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 Lyon 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.

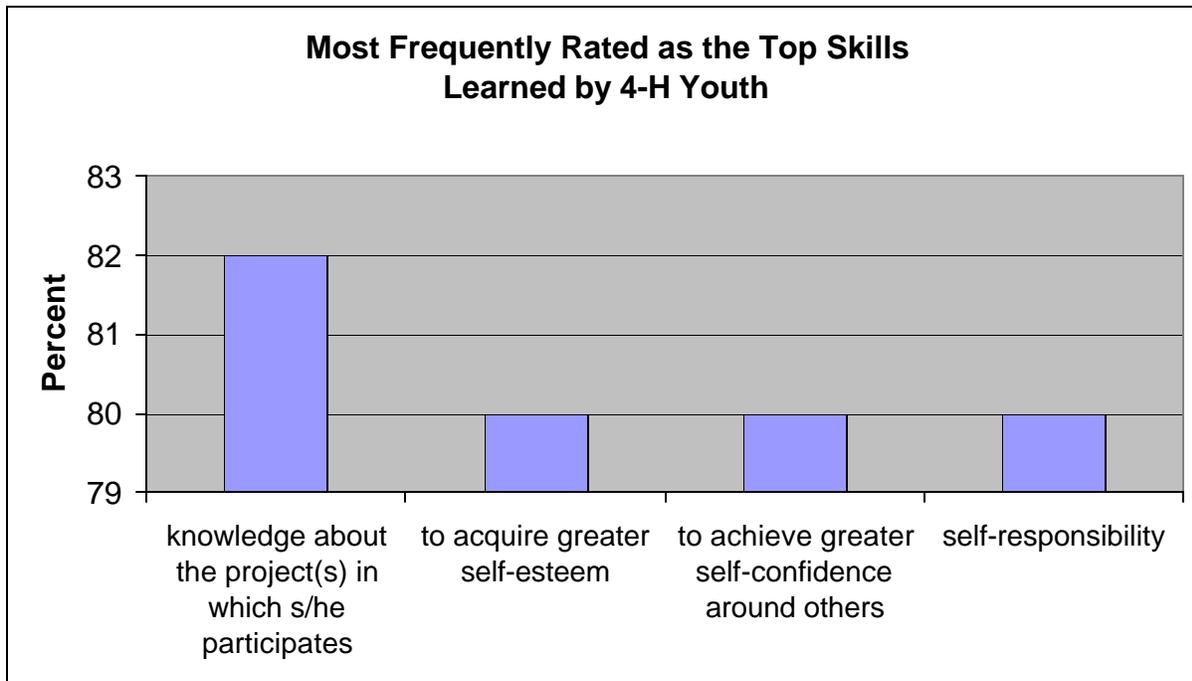
Each individual was mailed a two-page questionnaire with instructions, and a self-addressed and stamped return envelope. Also included was a cover letter that explained the purpose of the survey, ensured confidentiality to participants, and thanked them for their participation. Of the 603 survey recipients, 90 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 17 percent response rate.

Results of the Assessment

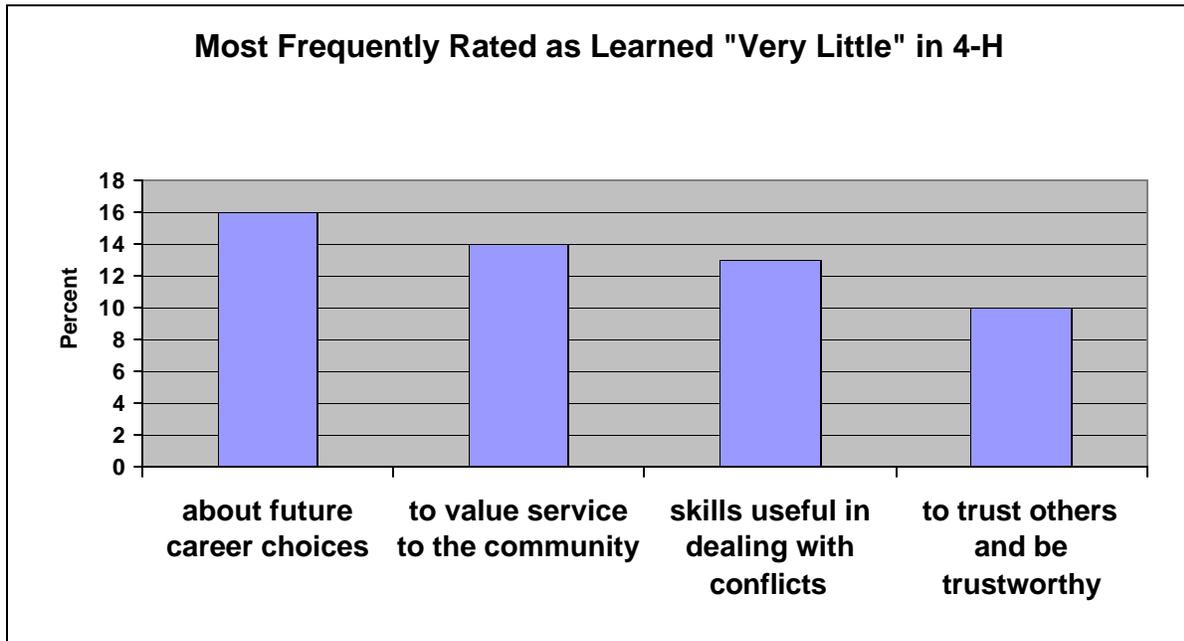
On a scale of 1 to 5 with “1” being “very little” and “5” being “very much,” respondents were asked to circle the number that best indicates how much their child is learning as a result of 4-H. Respondents were given an opportunity to indicate that they “didn’t know.” The results were sorted into two 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 *knowledge about the 4H project in which the child participates*. Other top rated skills are: *greater self-esteem, greater self-confidence, and self-responsibility*. Assessment results indicate that life skills targeted for improvement in Lyon County 4-H include teaching youth about *future career choices, to value community service, to deal with conflicts, and to trust others and be more trustworthy*.



Percent indicating "much" or "very much"	Percent Much & Very Much
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	82
to acquire greater self-esteem	80
to achieve greater self-confidence around others	80
self-responsibility	80
relationship-building skills	78
to set and reach goals	73
improved communication skills	69
improved decision-making ability	69
improved organizational skills	65
to trust others and be trustworthy	64
improved skills to lead peers	63
to value service to the community	60
improved public-speaking skills	52
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	44



Percent indicating "little" or "very little"	Percent Little & <u>Very Little</u>
about future career choices	16
to value service to the community	14
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	13
to trust others and be trustworthy	10
improved public-speaking skills	9
improved organizational skills	7
improved skills to lead peers	7
to set and reach goals	7
improved communication skills	6
relationship-building skills	6
self-responsibility	6
to acquire greater self-esteem	5
to achieve greater self-confidence around others	5
improved decision-making ability	3
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	3

When asked “whose responsibility is it to see to it that your child gets the most out of 4-H”, the majority of respondents (57%) indicated it is the parents’ responsibility followed by volunteer 4-H leaders (14%) and children (14%). Only 2 percent of the respondents believed either the extension staff or their community were responsible for their child getting the most from 4-H.

In Lyon County, the majority of respondents indicated that they reside in a rural area (69%) followed by farm (23%). Only 6 percent consider themselves to be urban residents. The majority (89%) indicated that they were white. Nearly half (41%) reported that as a child, s/he had been a member of 4-H. Only 27 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**:

- *The opportunity to learn different skills in different areas.*
- *[4-H] teaches new skills, entertainment, and exercise.*
- *My children learn responsibility.*
- *Opportunities for kids to participate at the state level.*
- *The [4-H] camp program.*
- *[4-H] gives kids something to do to better our community and show them how to care about animals.*
- *4-H is a great program for teaching responsibility and accountability.*
- *My children are learning new skills, but more importantly, they are learning to be responsible and independent thinkers. Each completed project builds their self-confidence and self-esteem.*
- *It gives kids a chance to participate in activities they might have never done.*

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

- *Parents doing for kids and being over-involved.*
- *People (leaders) are partial to certain children.*
- *Some of the activities/programs are based on parents, i.e., low-income family probably can't afford horse program.*
- *The parents that don't hold kids accountable.*
- *The social separation. Each group [project] is very much divided. The ski club doesn't even recognize there are other 4-H groups.*

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

- *I feel that the record books are a deterrent to many new members. I know that for kids approximately 9 to 11 years, the parent must do nearly all, helping the child to fill*

it out. Many parents don't have the time and that means the child doesn't continue with the 4-H experience.

- *Project learning and variety.*
- *Many children do not have the capability/resources to do some of the traditional projects. Projects need to reflect current interest—computers, etc.*
- *Extend the season somehow.*
- *Get the schools to participate more.*
- *Making more programs and making the public aware of these programs.*

Conclusions

To summarize, a pilot assessment of 4-H life skills teaching effectiveness in Lyon County indicated that 4-H is strong in teaching knowledge specific to individual 4-H projects and life skills that develop self-esteem, self-confidence and self-responsibility. Life skills that need attention include future career choices, the value of community service, skills useful in dealing with conflicts, trusting others, and being trustworthy.

Volunteer leaders and 4-H parents indicate that there are many aspects about 4-H that are well liked including, the variety of activities, the knowledge gained, and the responsibility learned. Structural changes that 4-H should investigate include more school and club interaction, longer programs, a greater variety of affordable projects, less record keeping for younger children, and attention to how to appropriately involve parents in the experience.

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

Blyth, D. 2000. "Extension's Roles in Community Youth Development for the 21st Century," The Center. Communication and Educational Technology Services, University of Minnesota Extension Service.

Traub, R.E. 1994. Reliability for the Social Sciences: Theory and Applications. Vol. 3. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. 1993. "Youth Development in Nevada, Core Concepts: A Framework for Programming." Tri-fold Brochure.

The University of Nevada, Reno is an Equal Opportunity/ Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, creed, national origin, veteran status, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation in any program activity it operates. The University of Nevada employs only United States citizens and aliens lawfully authorized to work in the United States.