



# COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

## *Bringing the University to You*

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## Life Skills Learned in 4-H: An Assessment in Humboldt County

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### Introduction

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

In January 2001, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension designed and piloted a mail survey in Lyon County to assess the success of 4-H in youth development. The survey has been conducted in other counties in Nevada, including Humboldt County. Assessment at the county level is necessary because 4-H programs in Nevada are managed at the county level. This fact sheet will discuss the results of the survey in Humboldt County.

### Designing and Conducting the Assessment

In designing a tool to assess local 4-H programs, there are many models of youth development with which 4-H can be compared. One model focuses on six desired outcomes for successful youth development. These 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 develop and promote *caring* relationships with others. These youth *connect* with people and organizations, *contribute* their services to make a difference in both their personal development and their community, and demonstrate responsible and honest *character*.

The second model for youth development uses “core concepts” established by University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. These concepts are used to design programs to develop 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 increased social competence, and;
- obtain career and occupational information to *help prepare for the world of work*.

Questions asked in this assessment were based partly upon the six descriptors discussed above and partly upon Nevada’s “core concepts” for teaching life skills. Combining the components of both models resulted in 15 questions to

assess how well Humboldt County's 4-H program is effectively teaching life skills. Each respondent rated the teaching effectiveness of each life skill on a scale of 1 to 5, with "1" being "very little" and "5" being "very much". Respondents were given an opportunity to indicate they "didn't know", and were provided an opportunity to provide written comments about what they "like best, like least" and "would like to change" about Humboldt County's 4-H program.

The two-page questionnaire was mailed to each adult volunteer 4-H leader, and to the parents of youth enrolled in Humboldt County's 4-H program. The survey participants were selected because leaders and parents have the best opportunity to observe if and how 4-H programs effect youth. Also, 4-H leaders are directly involved in achieving many 4-H management goals. All responses were anonymous, being returned to the Humboldt County Extension Educator in self-addressed stamped envelopes.

The results were sorted into four groups. The values "4" and "5" were combined into one category to reflect youth learning "much" or "very much" about specific life skills. The middle value "3" was interpreted to mean a neutral response. The values "2" and "1" were combined into one category to reflect youth who were learning "little" or "very little" about specific life skills. All "Don't Know" responses were classified as the fourth category.

## Results of the Assessment

Cooperative Extension mailed 122 surveys, with 36 being returned. The response rate was 29.5%, which is well above the 10% average for an unsolicited survey.

All responses are shown in Figure 1. The values below the questions in Figure 1 reflect the question number on the survey form, and link data in the graph with information in the text below. At least 70% of respondents felt youth were learning "much" or "very much" for the following life skill areas:

- *the projects in which s/he participates* (Q23);
- *acquiring self-esteem* (Q14)
- *to set and reach goals* (Q24)
- *achieve greater self-confidence around others* (Q17)
- *building relationship skills* (Q13)
- *improved communication skills* (Q12)

Between 50% and 70% of respondents felt youth were learning "much" or "very much" about:

- *self-responsibility* (Q21)
- *improved decision making* (Q16)
- *improved organizational skills* (Q15)
- *improved skills to lead peers* (Q19)
- *improved public speaking skills* (Q18)
- *to trust others and to be trustworthy* (Q22)
- *about future career choices* (Q20)

Between 30% and 49% of respondents felt youth were learning "much" or "very much" about:

- *the value of service to the community* (Q25)
- *skills useful in dealing with conflicts* (Q11)

At least 20% of respondents felt youth learn "little" or "very little" about:

- *future career choices* (Q20)
- *skills useful in dealing with conflicts* (Q11)

Between 10% and 15% of respondents felt youth were learning "little" or "very little" about:

- *improved communication skills* (Q12)
- *improved skills to lead peers* (Q19)
- *improved public speaking skills* (Q18)
- *to trust others and be trustworthy* (Q22)
- *future career choices* (Q20)
- *the value of service to the community* (Q25)
- *skills useful in dealing with conflicts* (Q11)

About 59% of respondents considered their child's level of activity and participation as high or very high, compared to other children in 4-H. Nearly 15% of respondents felt their child has low to very-low levels of participation. Almost all respondents felt that parents (47%) and adult leaders (38%) had primary responsibility for seeing that youth "get the most out of the 4-H program". Less than 3% of respondents felt the child, the community, or Cooperative Extension were responsible for ensuring that youth get the most from the 4-H program.

In Humboldt County, the majority of respondents indicated they reside in a rural area (57%), followed by farm (31%) and urban (11%). The majority of respondents (88%) indicated they were Caucasian. The rest were Hispanic. Approximately 47% reported that as a child, s/he had participated in 4-H, while 72% of the respondents had served as a volunteer leader. The average length of time served as a volunteer leader was six years.

## **Selected Written Comments Provided by Survey Respondents**

Written comments on the survey form were classified into several categories, depending on whether they reflected management of the 4-H program, the teaching of life skills, or other unrelated aspects of the program. Comments listed below are those felt to reflect the learning of life skills. Some comments may be appropriate to both the management of the 4-H program and the teaching life skills; therefore, they occur on both fact sheets.

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

- Learning to compete
- Selection of topics and qualified teachers
- Teach kids they want to learn
- Meeting others interested in same things
- Great leaders
- Leaders are excellent, very knowledgeable and dedicated
- Provides our children a sense of self-worth
- Gives kids a chance to be involved in a community
- A lot of kids can learn and have fun
- The diverse projects available
- Learning a skill that will be with them for a lifetime
- Learning about so many things
- Able to learn from it
- Kids are accountable to others for their decisions

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

- Not enough activities
- Record books
- No workshop on what is required of a 4-H member for journals, paperwork, etc.
- Not enough farm classes
- Extension staff
- Leaders need more support
- Lack of commitment by parents whose children enroll
- Leaders (large animal) need to spend more time covering show techniques

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

- Extension staff
- Make more fun so others will participate more
- More involvement from parents and community
- Lack of participation by many 4-H groups at Humboldt County Fair
- Showmanship training for large animals
- Have kids more involved in goals and decision-making
- When parents are found doing the work the child gets disqualified. It's the only way parents will learn

- Require every 4-H child to give a project demonstration to teach public speaking and much more
- More help with the record books

## Discussion and Conclusions

Data collected from both adult 4-H leaders and parents of 4-H youth show they feel most youth are learning a large number of life skills. Over 50% of respondents felt children were learning “much” or “very much” about 13 of the 15 life skills surveyed. There were only two life skills areas in which 20% or more of respondents felt youth learned “little” or “very little”. These were *skills useful in dealing with conflicts* (Q11) and *future career choices* (Q20). All of these responses probably reflect the basic structure of 4-H programs and their intrinsic ability, or lack thereof, to teach the life skills surveyed.

Most 4H programs are organized around clubs, with each member conducting an individual project. The focus on individual projects should result in youth learning about life skills related more to individual actions, than group interactions. The results of the survey show this. Respondents rated learning *knowledge about the projects participated in* (Q23) very high. The acquisition of the knowledge to successfully complete an individual project is likely have positive results for *building high esteem* (Q14), *learning to set and reach goals* (Q24), *building self-confidence* (Q17), *learning self-responsibility* (Q21), *strengthening decision making ability* (Q16), and *improving organizational skills* (Q15). Over 60% of respondents felt youth learned much or very much about each of these life skills. Each of these skills are important for helping individuals build relationships with others and organizations, because they create trust and confidence; thus, the high rating for *relationship building skills* (Q13).

*Improved skills to lead peers* (Q16), *improved public speaking skills* (Q18), *learning to trust others and be trustworthy* (Q22), *learning to value service to the community* (Q25), and *skills useful in dealing with conflicts* (Q11) all received lower ratings for learning “much/very much”, or higher ratings for “neutral”, learning “little/very little”, and/or “don’t know”. Each of these life skills are more likely to be strengthened through regular group interactions, not by working on individual projects. To increase the percentage of youth who learn “much/very much” about the fore-mentioned life skills (in this paragraph) they probably need more opportunities for more interaction in medium to large sized groups, or club settings.

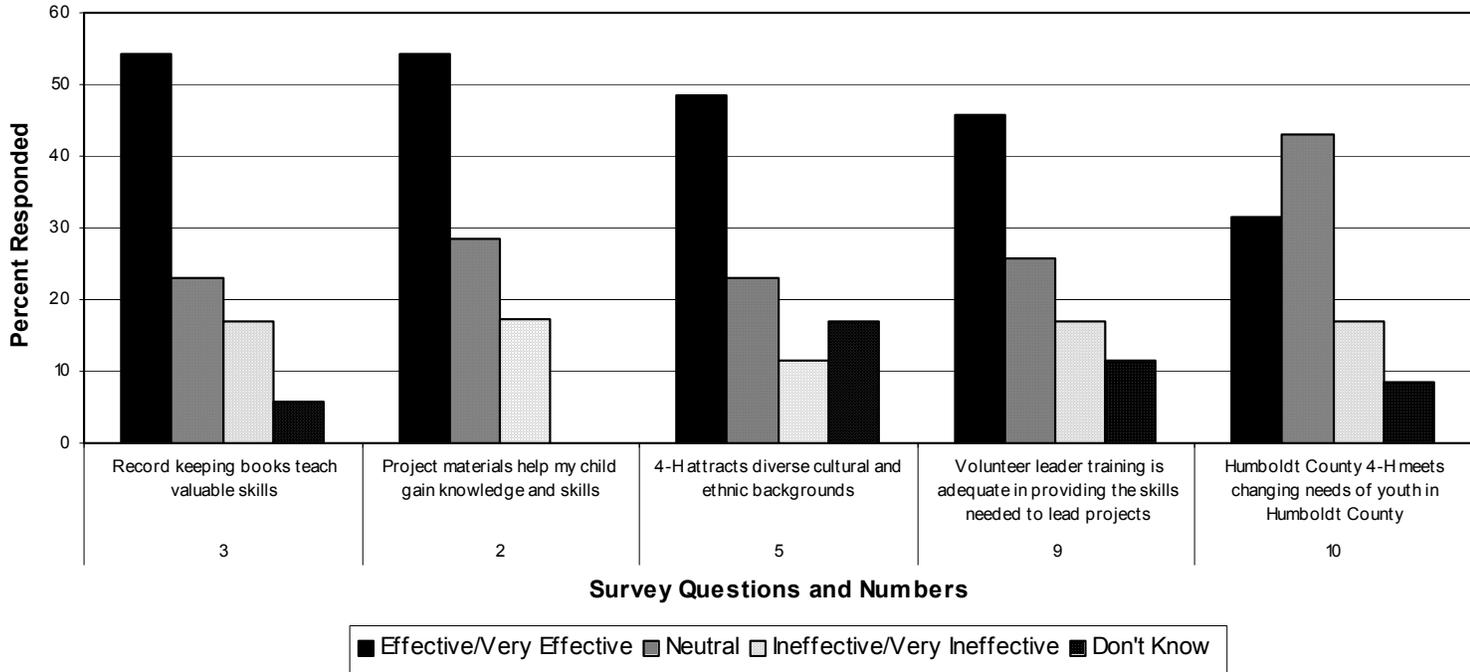
An interesting finding occurred with the very different responses for *improved communication skills* (Q12) and *improved public speaking skills* (Q18). Public speaking is an important communication skill, but the youth’s ability to improve public speaking skills was rated much lower than overall communication skills. Other than an apparent lack of public speaking opportunities for most participants, there are no clear reasons for this difference. It is worth noting that one respondent suggested adding a public speaking component to each project.

Efforts are underway to replicate this assessment throughout Nevada. This statewide information will help provide further understanding and help for managing the 4-H program in all counties

## References

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**Figure 1 (continued). Effectiveness of Humboldt County 4-H**



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