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## Life Skills Development in Youth: Impact Research in Action

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## Life Skills Development in Youth: Impact Research in Action

### Abstract

Developing life skills is a key element of 4-H programming, but research on the impact of 4-H on life skill development is minimal. 4-H alumni and volunteers were surveyed to explore the question "Does involvement in 4-H Youth Development programs help youth learn and use specific life skills?" 4-H alumni identified life skills learned through 4-H participation from a list of choices and in an open-ended format. Volunteers agreed that life skills were learned, although their assessment of specific skills differed from that of alumni. Findings indicate that long-term impacts of 4-H membership exist and can be measured.

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## Introduction

A key element for many youth development programs, including 4-H, focuses on the development of practical life skills (Perkins & Borden, 2003). Since the introduction of the 4-H Life Skills Wheel (Hendricks, 1998), 4-H practitioners have used the model as a framework to plan, implement, and evaluate 4-H Youth Development programs.

Though use of the model has been extensive, research evaluating the development of life skills for youth involved in 4-H Youth Development programs has not. Because 4-H is a publicly funded program, it is important to demonstrate the difference 4-H makes in the lives of youth and adult volunteers. There is no shortage of anecdotal stories from parents, volunteers, and youth about

how 4-H has influenced their lives.

While sharing these stories with stakeholders is important, 4-H Youth Development staff must also be more intentional and systematic in collecting and reporting program impacts. Astroth (2003) presents a convincing argument about the need to increase the scholarly status of 4-H. Though there has been some effort to evaluate the development of life skills in 4-H youth program or event participants (Seevers & Dormody, 1995; Dormody, Seevers, & Clason, 1993; Hein & Cantrell, 1986; Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992), more documented impact is needed.

Although the 4-H Life Skills Wheel identifies and defines 35 life skills, our research project in Maine used selected questions from a study in New York to identify the impact of 4-H Club membership (Rodriguez, Hirschl, Mead, & Goggin, 1999) on recent 4-H Club alumni. Questions from that survey, as well as other open-ended questions, were used to capture the impact of life skills development through participation in Maine 4-H Youth Development programs. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data collected from the survey provided insights into the development of life skills learned by 4-H alumni.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of our study was to measure the long-term impact of Maine 4-H Youth Development programs by surveying recent 4-H alumni to determine if they had learned specific life skills. The following research questions guided our study:

- Does involvement in 4-H Youth Development programs help youth learn and use specific life skills?
- Which of the life skills do youth and volunteers think are the most and least important to learn?

In an attempt to answer these questions, narrative stories from recent 4-H alumni--those who had graduated from high school between 1999 and 2003--and adult volunteers were collected and analyzed.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative study incorporated telephone interviews with 4-H alumni and adult volunteers for data collection. Data collection occurred in two phases, and the interview questions were drawn from a study of 4-H Clubs in New York (Rodriguez, Hirschl, Mead, & Goggin, 1999). Two questions from each of the four areas (Head, Heart, Hands, and Health) of the 4-H Life Skills Wheel were arbitrarily selected. Participants were asked both multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

A criterion sampling strategy was used to gather information-rich cases. Criterion sampling requires all participants in the study to meet certain criteria and to have experienced the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). Eighty percent of the 4-H alumni (n=48) interviewed had been involved with 4-H for more than 7 years, and 97 percent (n=58) lived on a farm, in the country, or in a small town.

Thirty percent of the adult volunteers (n=13) had been involved with the 4-H program for more than 10 years, and 52 percent (n= 22) of the adult volunteers had been involved for 1 to 6 years. Seventy-five percent (n=32) of the adult volunteers live on a farm, in the country, or in a small town.

### **Phase One: 4-H Alumni**

- All county Extension offices in Maine provided the names of 4-H alumni that had graduated from high school over the previous 5 years (1999-2003).
- A total of 63 potential survey participants were contacted. This number was small because of address and name changes and lack of an adequate tracking system. Only three declined to participate in the study. A graduate assistant conducted telephone interviews with eight males and 52 females. All of the participants were asked the same questions. Multiple-choice questions were asked first, followed by open-ended questions. This research design may have influenced the answers to the open-ended questions.
- Narrative data from the telephone interviews were transcribed.
- Data were analyzed using QSR NVivo version 2.0.161 qualitative research software to identify common themes. NVivo software organizes and stores qualitative data, searches for patterns, and assists researchers with other tasks (Bazeley & Richards, 2000).

### **Phase Two: Adult Volunteers**

- Forty-three adult volunteers were identified in six of Maine's 16 counties. The six counties were chosen based on the county staff member's willingness to participate in the study. Volunteers were randomly selected in some counties and not in others.

- Interview questions were selected from a corresponding set of questions asked of the 4-H alumni in this study. The questions were modified to relate to their roles as 4-H volunteers. All participants were asked the same questions.
- County staff conducted interviews with participants by phone and face to face. County staff members were given minimal instructions and training regarding interview techniques.
- Narrative data were transcribed and analyzed using QSR NVivo version 2.0.161 qualitative research software to identify common themes.
- A cross-case analysis was completed to analyze the common themes from the interviews with adult volunteers and 4-H alumni.

## Results

Table 1 reflects the percentage of youth and adults who responded positively (yes) to the question, "Did 4-H help you learn this life skill?" Sixty to 90% of the youth identified the following skills: accepting people who are different, community service, making healthy choices, and learning job skills. Seventy-five to 95% of the adults surveyed indicated youth learned six life skills: community service, making decisions, keeping records, communicating, making healthy choices, and learning job skills.

**Table 1.**  
Percentage of Youth and Adults 4-H Helped Learn Life Skills

<b>4-H Life Skills</b>	<b>Youth</b>	<b>Adult</b>
Accepting people who are different	92%	23%
Community service	82%	95%
Making healthy choices	72%	77%
Learning job skills	63%	75%
Record keeping	40%	97%
Communicating	8%	87%
Making decisions	5%	95%

Table 2 lists the common themes that emerged from the narrative responses from 4-H alumni and adult volunteers to the following open-ended questions:

- "What life skills did you gain in your involvement in 4-H?" (youth)
- "What life skills do you think 4-H members gained from being 4-H Club members?" (adult)

The common themes were self-esteem, teamwork, responsibility, planning/organizing, and cooperation.

**Table 2.**  
Common Themes from Narrative Responses

<b>Life Skills</b>	
<b>Youth Themes</b>	<b>Adult Themes</b>
Self esteem	Self esteem/confidence

Teamwork	Teamwork
Responsibility	Responsibility
Planning/organizing	Planning/organizing
Cooperation	Cooperation
Record keeping	Problem-solving
Goal setting	Positive outlook for their future
Community service	Concern for others/helping others
Communication	Competence
Learning to learn (project specific to showing animals)	
Leadership	
Accepting differences	
Other Skills: Competition (animal project related) Public speaking Working with younger children	

Table 3 summarizes the responses to the question, "What are your future plans?" More than 80% of the youth indicated an aspiration of furthering their education after high school.

**Table 3.**  
Responses to Question on Future Plans

<b>What are your (youth's) future plans?</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
I'd like to go to college after high school	57%
I'd like to go to college and then go on after college to graduate or professional school	25%
I'd like to go straight into the work force	13%
I am already working	4%
Undecided	1%

Table 4 summarizes the responses youth gave regarding the question, "Compared to others your age, how well did you do in school?" Compared to others their age, 56% of 4-H alumni rated themselves above or much above average.

**Table 4.**

<b>How well do you do in school?</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Much above average	18%
Above average	38%
Average	42%
Below average	2%
Much below average	0%

### **Limitations**

One of the major limitations in this study was the inability to contact 4-H alumni. Current contact information was not available for all potential study participants. In Maine, there is not a system for tracking 4-H alumni once they exit the program. Each county office provided a list of recent graduates with their last known contact information. However, researchers found some families had moved, 4-H graduates had gone on to college, and 911 address changes in some areas of the state made it difficult to find people. This limited the potential sample population to 63.

County staff members interviewed volunteers, thus, our data collection techniques varied. Although the same set of questions was used with each individual, volunteers were randomly selected in some counties and not in others. Some were interviewed by phone, while others were interviewed face to face.

In the study, participants were first asked multiple-choice questions. By using this method, responses may have been limited. It may have been more telling to have asked open-ended questions first.

### **Implications**

#### **Measuring Impact**

One of the questions that arises time and time again is, "Can the impacts of 4-H really be measured?" The answer is yes. The life skills learned can be tracked through the use of project records, fair exhibits, 4-H stories, testimonials, and interviews with 4-H alumni. What's frustrating is that Extension staff members do not always see an immediate impact with many program areas. The long-term impact often cannot be determined until the youth reach adulthood and can reflect back on how their 4-H experience has helped them.

Recommendations to capture these important impacts include development of an instrument for tracking 4-H alumni. Such an instrument could also provide support in volunteer recruitment and funding to state 4-H foundations. In a time when funding is continuously being trimmed, Extension staff must improve their ability to document and report the positive impact of life skills development.

#### **Does Time Matter?**

Results from this research project imply that life skills were learned by being involved with a specific 4-H project over time. Eighty percent of the youth participants were active in 4-H for seven or more years. Sixty-two percent of those surveyed were active in animal science projects, which are known to be time intensive. A question that deserves further exploration might be whether there is a minimal amount of time that youth need to be exposed to an educational program before it has an impact. And, if so, what is the minimum amount of time?

#### **Aspirations**

One of the most interesting results from the research indicated that over 50% of the students rated themselves as above average or way above average when it comes to academics in school. Eighty-two percent of the youth aspire to go on to college after high school, with 25% indicating they would like to further their education after college. The 5-year average for Maine High School graduates furthering their education after high school is only 67%.

Opportunity is knocking at Extension's door. Are there ways in which Extension staff can partner with other departments and colleges on student recruitment? Do 4-H members across the nation attend land-grant universities as a result of their early experience with a research-based youth development program?

## Difference of Opinion

One final implication revolved around the dramatic differences that were noted between youth and adult responses to the questions about what life skills were learned as a result of 4-H programming (Table 1). Skill development in community service, healthy lifestyle choices, and work-force preparation were rated similarly in percentage by both 4-H alumni and adult volunteers. However, significant differences were noted in the following areas: accepting people who are different, keeping records, communication skills, and making decisions.

Why is there such a perceived difference in the areas noted above? In the case of accepting people with differences, 92% of 4-H alumni stated they had learned this skill as a result of 4-H involvement. Only 23% of the adult volunteers felt this was a skill that club members learned.

Further research is needed to confirm these results. If these perceived differences are in fact real, this may have profound implications for areas such as program design, volunteer training, and volunteer support.

## Conclusion

The results of our study lead us to believe with some confidence that involvement in 4-H Youth Development Club programs does indeed help youth learn and use specific life skills. Although both recent 4-H Club program graduates and adult volunteers verified this hypothesis, their opinions regarding which skills were deemed most important differed greatly. The findings show clearly that both youth and adults involved in 4-H display a high degree of satisfaction with the program. Even more important, the data gathered suggest there are plenty of opportunities to further capture the impacts of the 4-H program on youth development.

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