Retaining 4-H Youth Participants

What can be done to encourage eligible youth to continue 4-H participation?

Introduction

Youth receive the maximum benefits of the 4-H Youth Development Program through active participation over extended periods of time. Therefore, 4-H Youth Development professionals seek to bring best practices into place that will encourage sustained enrollment in the 4-H program, making stronger positive differences in their lives. A review of 4-H studies—and studies of other out-of-school programs as well—found that youth who discontinued their involvement failed to experience the factors that brought satisfaction to youth participants who remained in the programs. Though external factors such as school demands, jobs, and other activities made it more difficult for some youth to continue 4-H membership, unsatisfying experiences in the program were the primary motivators in ending 4-H participation. Consequently, 4-H youth professionals and volunteer leaders can do much to keep youth in their programs by more effectively meeting their needs. The presence of the four essential elements for positive youth development—belonging, independence, generosity, and mastery—lays the foundation for strong youth program retention. By partnering with families to build these elements, staff and volunteer leaders can increase the likelihood that youth will remain in 4-H longer and gain more as a result.

Research to Practice Points

- **Belonging**—4-H members of all ages want a “nice,” helpful, caring, respectful adult to whom they can relate (2,14,21,28). Youth want community-based clubs (6,11,21) where friendships can be built and strengthened (7,17,19,20). This group needs to be a physically and emotionally safe haven (12,14,26) where they have fun (7,11,14,19,20,21,22). Additionally, scheduling flexibility will facilitate member engagement in these programs (2,8,11,18,22,35).

- **Independence**—Youth want independence. The experiential learning model of doing, reflecting, and applying provides the framework for program activity that energizes, satisfies, and creates opportunities for youth to develop age-appropriate critical thinking skills (4,8,1,13,16,17,19,20,21,28,32,35). Members need opportunities to exercise their independence through trying out different roles as club officers and leadership at all levels—club, county, and beyond (4,7,8,11,13,14,16,17,19,20,23,33,35,36) allow youth to exercise their independence. Participating in planning, implementing, and evaluating programs (1,2,10,11,12,16,17,18,20,32,35)brought satisfaction and the desire to continue 4-H participation. Youth want “voice and choice,” (14,17,19,20,23,24,35), not leader dominance (17).

- **Generosity**—Youth highly value participation in community service and service-learning opportunities (7,17,19,20,35) and will leave programs where they lack these opportunities (17,19,20). Youth want to give to others, and their satisfaction is often tied to opportunities to teach younger or less experienced youth (17,19,20,23,33,36).

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1 See [http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/family/sri/youthdev_sri_4h.html#nystudy](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/family/sri/youthdev_sri_4h.html#nystudy).

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Mastery—4-H members are drawn to opportunities where they can learn new things, develop life skills, build character, practice leadership, set and achieve personal goals, and have experiences that are not available in school and elsewhere (6,7,11,13,14,16,17,19,20,21,28,38). They want meaningful projects and activities (7,17,20). Youth want to feel competent as they engage in learning opportunities. Likewise, youth need to be supported (19,20,21,28,36) as well as challenged (13) to find satisfaction in club programs and activities. Recognition is motivating, but more than just competitive and extrinsic awards are needed to meet the needs of all youth (6,7,9,11,15,19,20,21). In several studies, girls usually found greater satisfaction with 4-H learning opportunities than boys (4,25).

Parental Engagement—Parental involvement will strengthen youth connections to the 4-H program (2, 6, 7, 11, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 25, 32, 33, 36). Securing parental support can be achieved through activities for the whole family (21, 33), maintaining high levels of communication (3, 7, 8) with parents especially in the first-year (or two) of their child’s involvement (3, 18, 35), engaging parents in programming (12, 21, 29, 35), and keeping parents informed of activities and opportunities that are available to their children. Parents (as well as youth) need to understand the benefits of 4-H participation (7, 8, 11, 13, 16, 17). Open communication lines give opportunities to overcome barriers (2, 7, 12, 19, 20, 35) such as transportation (35), financial strains (7, 16, 35), and scheduling conflicts (2, 8, 11, 17) that could lead to youth drop-out.

Quality Adult Relationships—Frontline 4-H youth development work relies heavily on volunteers to put these components successfully in place. Because the adult/youth relationship is central to this work (2,14,21,28), 4-H staff must seek to retain sufficient adults (21) who relate well to youth (7,17,25,35). To infuse opportunities for belonging, independence, generosity, and mastery into programming efforts, volunteers need to be equipped for their work through training and resources (8,14,19,20,21,36). Among their tasks, volunteer leaders need to provide a variety of interesting age-appropriate activities, projects, and events for youth that meet the needs and expectations (4,8,11,13,16,17,19,20,21,27,28,32,35). Such efforts can help youth thrive.
Conclusions:

What We Know

4-H, like all youth-serving organizations, is challenged by the sense of being in competition for young people’s time (37) with the array of opportunities available. The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development, which has been led since 2002 by Dr. Richard Lerner, demonstrates that 4-H participation can greatly support future life successes for youth. Retention is a necessity for such impact!

4-H professional staff and volunteer leaders must be equipped to nurture belonging, independence, generosity, and mastery in program planning, design, and implementation. Trained adult leadership—staff and volunteer—is not an option but crucial to making this happen. Youth voice must be in the mix as decisions are made. Parents must be recruited and valued as allies in programming. Strong adult-youth relationships and partnerships will enhance the likely outcome of long 4-H careers for youth enrollees. All youth who enroll in 4-H will not stay in 4-H. However, the most important factors in retention are related to the quality of the experience, not the characteristics of the youth. Assuring high quality is the responsibility of 4-H professionals and volunteers.

What We Don't Know

More study is needed to assess the relative importance of various factors in influencing youth retention. As 4-H professionals experience staff reduction and recognize the time constraints of program volunteers, human resources within the 4-H Youth Development program must be properly allocated to bring the greatest impact in youth work. Youth leadership could be key to making the program better for everyone, but little research is available explaining just how to achieve that.

Financial resources for programming have also been cut back severely, and programming activities must take that reality into account when choices are being made. This leads to the need to find more definitive answers to the following questions:

- What are the most important things that staff and volunteer leaders need to know and do to build strong programming opportunities for youth?
- How can youth leadership be used effectively to enhance the program for the youth leader as well as the youth recipient?
- How can programs best respond to varying youth interests and developmental stages?
- How can local 4-H programs best assess their participants’ needs and meet them?
- What are the barriers to the participation of diverse youth, including those facing severe challenges such as poverty, discrimination, and disabilities?
- What constitutes “fun” for youth, and how can adults assure that youth have fun while keeping the mission and goals of the 4-H program central?
- What provokes youth to lose interest, and how can that appropriately and effectively be addressed?
- How can gender differences in youth perceptions of 4-H best be addressed?
- What effect does joining 4-H at a particular age—perhaps as a Cloverbud or as a middle schooler—have on member retention?
- How can we tell the difference between a youth who leaves 4-H because other activities are more appropriate and one who can and should be retained?
• What is the relative importance of any single factor—parent support, fun, peer interactions, adult-youth relationships, project choice, leadership opportunities, level of participation—on youth satisfaction and retention; and how do these factors interact?
• What differences exist between urban and rural programming; and what effects, if any, do these differences generate?

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Selected References


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