

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE 4-H EXPERIENCE

# Overview

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### Introduction

Youth development is the continual growth process in which all youth are invested in meeting their basic personal and social needs to feel safe, well cared for, valued, useful and emotionally grounded (Miller, 2003). Scientists have long studied what youth need to be successful and contributing adults. Youth development is an educational field which includes numerous frameworks and lists of elements that are used by different researchers. 4-H youth development has its own list of elements. This set is based on the four Essential Elements which were distilled from the 8 Essential Elements generated by the 4-H Impact Study, based out of the Norton School at the University of Arizona. Several key elements have been identified and described to demonstrate youth development frameworks, including Lerner's five C's important to positive youth development, including: competence, confidence, character, connection and caring (Lerner, 2002). These documents will emphasize the importance of understanding how learning skills, developing interests and spending meaningful time with peers and adults contributes to positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

"Youth need to feel their lives have meaning and purpose. By participating in 4-H community service and citizenship activities, youth can connect to communities and learn to give back to others. It's clear that these experiences provide the foundation that helps us understand the big picture of life and find purpose and meaning" (Kress, 2004). Positive youth environments aid in lowering problem behaviors (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome & Ferrari, 2003).

The 4-H youth development program provides youth with unique opportunities for growth. Youth have the ability to actively participate in activities, master skills, feel safe and nurtured, while developing into capable and contributing members of a global society. High quality youth development doesn't just happen, but rather it occurs through careful planning and the deliberate inclusion of certain elements (Astroth, 1996). Numerous strategies within the 4-H youth development program are utilized

for learning, however, experiential learning in combination with University based research are united to offer the best educational opportunities available for youth and adults.

### Purpose

The purpose of this set of publications is to provide research based information to youth development professionals, volunteers, and youth on the subject of the four essential elements of positive youth development. Use these publications to discover what research supports the ideas behind each element and then utilize the pull-out to generate planning sessions and activity options to address program specific positive youth development objectives or goals.

### What does research show?

Youth development is the result of the accumulation of everyday people, places, and possibilities that youth experience (Pittman & Irby, 1996). In 2002, the National Research Council unveiled their findings to support the framework on the Eight Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). This research stimulated worldwide conversations regarding forward movements of youth development professionals. Youth organizations, such as 4-H youth development, began discussions relating directly to the work done by professionals and volunteers with youth. Many researchers suggest that when youth feel they are contributing members and have a connection within a program that they will get more from their involvement in areas, such as, skill building (Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003). Creating opportunities for youth to master skills and self-confidence is a cornerstone of 4-H youth development.

The Eight Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development include: caring adults, safe environment, mastery, service, self determination, inclusiveness, futuristic and engagement. These eight elements are described as "best practices". The foundation of the 4-H youth development

program relates directly to the union of practical application of knowledge with land grant research (Kress, 2004). The presence of the Eight Essential Elements of positive youth development is important for every level of 4-H program delivery (Kress, 2004). Involvement for youth in a well-run, well-organized setting will advance their learning capabilities and raise their self image. The Eight Essential Elements were distilled into four areas which meet the four basic human needs, as demonstrated on the pull-out, of belonging, generosity, independence and mastery.

The 4-H youth development program is a real, hands-on, practical experience. Each 4-H experience can happen in a club setting, a school, a community and/or in peer driven programs. Since its inception, a key element of the 4-H experience has been grounding all learning in hands-on, participatory methods as opposed to didactic or passive methods (Kolb, 1984).

The 4-H youth development program hinges on embracing the four elements of belonging, generosity, independence and mastery, along with the utilization of experiential learning. Positive youth development focuses on youth as partners in an educational program, not just as recipients of services. "Relevant and authentic youth participation is an essential component of the philosophy of youth development" (Carleton-Hug, et al., 2002).

## What are the four elements?

**Mastery** is the process of building knowledge, skills, attitudes, perceptions, wisdom, and finally, demonstrating their uses. Simply stated, mastery is an engagement in learning. Youth need to feel confident in their abilities to be capable, confident, and competent which are a part Lerner's (2002) construct for positive youth development. Youth, through repetition and practice, experience success, master the ability to problem solve and meet their challenges to develop their self confidence. Mastery enables youth to learn skills which ultimately allow them to make positive life choices for their future.

**Belonging** allows youth to participate in a program which creates a positive, inclusive and safe environment. This environment allows youth to embrace a sense of belonging while encouraging and supporting diverse members to feel comfortable and wanted. Youth need to know they are cared about by others and feel a sense of connection to others in a group setting (Walker & Dunham, 2002). 4-H gives youth the chance to feel physically and emotionally safe while actively participating and learning from others.

**Independence** occurs when youth begin to understand that they are able to influence people and events through decision making and action, (Kress, 2006). By exercising independence through 4-H leadership, youth mature in self confidence. All youth have something to share within a group setting. Independent "thinkers" and "doers" bring unique strengths to all groups. It is critical for youth to experience new opportunities, understand the effects of

events in their lives and face the positive and negative consequences of their actions.

**Generosity** allows youth the opportunity to feel their lives have great meaning and purpose. Youth need to explore 4-H community service/service learning programs, along with, citizenship activities. Through these programs, youth will develop a greater connection to their communities and learn to give service to others. Being needed by others and having the ability to give time, talents and caring concern adds elements of positive identity, worthiness and belonging (Kim & Sherman, 2006). Service to others is a positive way for youth to gain understanding of the larger community, state, country and world.

## Summary

Positive youth development emphasizes programmatic opportunities for youth to develop skills, practical knowledge, wisdom, kindness to others and a generous heart. Youth and adults have an outstanding opportunity to grow, learn and develop together.

While each of the four essential elements is vital to the overall growth and development of a powerful and effective positive youth development program, it is the union of all four elements that ensures positive youth development.

**Mastery** opens the door to significant accomplishments as youth grow and develop skills and understanding of their task at hand. **Belonging** is fostered when youth feel they belong to a group and that their participation is valued to the organization. **Independence** is crucial as young people reach out to grasp new experiences, feel the affects of events and sometimes face new consequences due to their decisions. **Generosity** is a wonderful feeling when youth experience the emotion of giving to others in need of attention, caring and love.

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# ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE 4-H EXPERIENCE



ELEMENTS	CLUB	SCHOOL ENRICHMENT	CAMPING	AFTER SCHOOL - MILITARY
<p><b>Mastery</b></p> <p><b>Engagement in Learning &amp; Opportunity for Mastery</b> The process over time of building knowledge, skills, attitudes, and wisdom, while demonstrating their uses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Projects (long term &amp; short term)</li> <li>County Fairs</li> <li>Life skill development</li> <li>Learning to conduct a meeting using Parliamentary Procedure</li> <li>Broad-based knowledge gained in one or more areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mastering skill and knowledge in a program area</li> <li>Adult determined activities with some student choices available</li> <li>Create implementation of state educational standards in a nonformal, fun and engaging way</li> <li>Students moving to the next level of learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating projects in camp workshop settings</li> <li>Journaling</li> <li>Planning, organizing &amp; scheduling camp programs</li> <li>Appropriate activities for ages and stages of participating youth</li> <li>Peer mentoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presentations and demonstrations</li> <li>Short term goals are achieved</li> <li>Learn by Doing Activities</li> <li>Accomplishments receive recognition</li> <li>Program officers master their skills in Parliamentary Procedure</li> </ul>
<p><b>Belonging</b></p> <p><b>Caring Adults</b> A caring adult is actively involved as an advisor, coach, guide, or mentor.</p> <p><b>Appropriate Structure</b></p> <p><b>Safe &amp; Inclusive Environment</b> Youth will participate in 4-H activities without the fear of physical or emotional harm.</p> <p><b>Positive Social Norms</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recreation games and activities</li> <li>Non-Competitive environment</li> <li>Ice breakers and name games to learn everyone's name</li> <li>Youth are greeted at the door by name</li> <li>Divide large groups into smaller groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safe environment for EVERYONE - No Bullying or Hazing allowed</li> <li>Ground rules are developed by the group</li> <li>Everyone is treated with respect</li> <li>Inclusive environment that avoids cliques</li> <li>Group activities to gain trust, cooperation and respect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team Building Activities</li> <li>Appropriate Adult/Youth Ratio</li> <li>Youth and adults sit together to share ideas, thoughts and comments</li> <li>Respect and acceptance regarding culture and diversity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team Building Activities</li> <li>Appropriate Adult/Youth Ratio</li> <li>Youth and adults sit together to share ideas, thoughts and comments</li> <li>Respect and acceptance regarding culture and diversity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Independence</b></p> <p><b>Self Determination</b> Youth feel a sense of control over their lives and exercise their potential to become self-directing, independent adults.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being an officer in a club setting</li> <li>Record book completion</li> <li>Junior/Teen Leader opportunities</li> <li>Self Determined projects are attempted and completed</li> <li>Demonstrations/Illustrated talks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School Garden (design and care)</li> <li>Lead Skill-A-Thon activities</li> <li>Youth take individual jobs to help market the program in their community</li> <li>Individual, in-depth study time</li> <li>Youth lead discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Camp counselor duties performed</li> <li>Preparing &amp; delivering workshops</li> <li>Group activity leader</li> <li>Dorm/Cabin monitor</li> <li>Collect and analyze camp evaluations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth select activities</li> <li>Homework/Tutoring time available</li> <li>Health Rocks! teen instructor</li> <li>Youth achieve recognition for their outstanding performance</li> <li>Able to demonstrate hands-on competencies</li> </ul>
<p><b>Generosity</b></p> <p><b>Service</b> Youth actively value and practice service to others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Volunteer leadership</li> <li>Community service activities</li> <li>Peer mentors/Junior leaders</li> <li>Members helping each other</li> <li>Companion Pets/Guide Dogs for the Blind</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Character education</li> <li>Raising awareness for the environment</li> <li>Community service/service learning activities</li> <li>Food bank &amp; Victory Garden programs</li> <li>Older youth reading and inspiring younger students to enjoy reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Character education</li> <li>Raising awareness for the environment</li> <li>Community service/service learning activities</li> <li>Food bank &amp; Victory Garden programs</li> <li>Older youth reading and inspiring younger students to enjoy reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>US Forest Service Hug-A-Tree program, survival programs</li> <li>Volunteer leaders donate their time for the betterment of the youth they serve</li> <li>Youth identify grass roots needs within the community and organize service to reflect that need</li> <li>Community service activities</li> <li>Counselors helping younger members</li> </ul>