



# Essential Elements and Best Practices of 4-H Project Experiences<sup>1</sup>

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Florida 4-H curriculum is defined as *the sum of all planned learning experiences* within a particular subject matter or area of focus. This encompasses the sequence of all the knowledge and experiences provided for youth ages five through eighteen through 4-H. This provides a system of educational experiences, including:

- Transferring knowledge and skills enhanced through educational materials, known as "projects."
- Creating *supporting events and activities*, either competitive or noncompetitive, within "project" areas.
- Providing *recognition opportunities* for youth to gain a sense of accomplishment through their achievements.

Project experiences are the core focus of much of the 4-H Program, providing the learn-by-doing foundation for 4-H members.

## What is a 4-H Project?

A "project" is a series of learning experiences of six hours or more within an area of interest. University faculty develop and support 4-H curricula for youth as part of the outreach of the land-grant mission through Cooperative Extension. Project curricula are research-based and university-supported.

## How Do Youth Learn, and What are Essential "Project Experiences" in 4-H?

4-H'ers learn from the educational materials provided to them, completing a planned sequence of

activities through hands-on, learn-by-doing exercises either individually or in a group environment. Quality "project literature" based on the latest research knowledge of the land-grant university system lays the foundation to guide 4-H members through their learning experiences. Each year, 4-H'ers choose projects of interest to complete.

*The use of quality educational materials to guide youth through a planned sequence is the first essential element of a quality project experience.* Florida 4-H supports a set of standards that guide the development and delivery of 4-H projects.

4-H youth can complete chosen projects either through age-appropriate self-paced learning activities outlined in the project literature or through leader-directed instruction. Therefore, *the second key element of a quality project experience is ensuring that project work is guided and validated by supportive, trained, caring adult project mentors or leaders.* Adult volunteers who share knowledge and skills with youth as project leaders and mentors are critical to the success of 4-H. More importantly, caring, trained adults are critical to the positive development of young people. Research consistently shows that young people who have a nonparent adult to relate to engage in fewer risky behaviors, stay in school longer, and make more positive choices.

*A third essential element of 4-H project experiences is youths' engagement in project related events and activities that focus on sharing what they have learned with others.* Youth can share their new information or skills through demonstrations or illustrated talks, the exhibition of products, or the performance of skills through fairs, quiz bowls,

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judging contests or skill-a-thons. These project activities help youth further develop their knowledge and gain confidence and competence by sharing information with others.

*A fourth key element of a quality project experience is self-evaluation and sense of accomplishment.* This gives youth the opportunity to record and report their goals, activities, and accomplishments to demonstrate that they have achieved certain levels of project completion. This is done through 4-H *Project Reports*. These reports are designed not only to help youth learn lifelong record-keeping skills, but to help them develop the ability for self-evaluation, goal-setting, and gaining a sense of accomplishment through their own self-determined learning.

Likewise, these project experiences should provide many incentives, awards, and recognition opportunities for project achievements. There are five types of project recognition: 1) participation; 2) progress toward goals; 3) standards of excellence for products or performance exhibited; 4) achieving through competition; and 5) cooperative learning experiences.

### What Skills Do Youth Gain from 4-H "Project Experiences"?

4-H utilizes the variety of subject-matter disciplines of the university to engage youth in project areas of interest. These projects not only guide youth to acquire new knowledge and information about the latest technology or issues that support work and family life, but they become the vehicle through which we can maximize positive youth development outcomes. Learning to be productive, to do well in school, and to develop positive outside interests (like 4-H) is part of the transition from youth to adulthood.

4-H uses a framework based upon the 4-H Pledge to organize the delivery of experiences that support the growth and development of youth. This model addresses the "life skills" within competency areas of youth development. These are presented in the model known as *Targeting Life Skills* (Hendricks, 1998). Florida 4-H has strategically identified skill areas to target within programs from this model.

Florida 4-H Programs target the following youth development life skills outcomes.

For youth to:

- Effectively communicate with others;
- Develop and maintain positive relationships with others;
- Process information to make effective decisions and positive choices;
- Lead and contribute to others (peers, family, community); and
- Demonstrate marketable/productive skills for work and family life through mastery in these project areas:
  - Agricultural Literacy
  - Animal and Plant Sciences
  - Communication and Expressive Arts
  - Citizenship and Civic Education
  - Environmental and Earth Sciences
  - Family and Consumer Sciences
  - Leadership Education
  - Healthy Lifestyle Choices
  - Science and Technology
  - Workforce and Career Preparation

### What Types of 4-H Project Materials are Provided?

A variety of materials are designed to support the youth learning experiences. Here are some of the types of materials created to support a "project area":

**Member Project Manuals/Workbooks** either guide an individual youth to work independently on a project with the help of his or her parent or other mentor, or to work within a group setting with leader-directed project meetings. This enables the youth to either experience the material at his or her own pace or to participate in leader-facilitated experiential hands-on activities with a group of youth, or both.

Regardless of the method, materials should be designed sequentially, experientially, and age-appropriately, and should allow for varied learning styles of youth.

Project manuals (or leader-led curricula packages for group-oriented 4-H projects) should be experiential. They should:

- Guide youth through goals they seek and set for themselves;

- Engage youth in decision-making, by choosing learn-by-doing activities to complete;
- Guide youth through reflection of new knowledge, skills or experiences;
- Guide youth from reflection to application of knowledge and skills to life;
- Support youth through events and activity opportunities to showcase their knowledge or project work in:
  - Demonstrations or illustrated talks
  - Exhibitions and shows
- Guide youth through self-reflection on their project accomplishments, recording and reporting evidence of their experiences and what they have learned; and
- Guide youth through citizenship, leadership, or service to others through their project work, including family and community activities.

The project manuals are designed using a three- to five-step experiential model, depending on the age of the youth and complexity of the subject. The *Experiential Model*, used in project material development, engages youth in an activity using the subject matter in concert with a targeted life skill. It then engages them in reflecting on their experience(s), and, finally, helps them to see how to apply the subject matter and the life skill to future situations or applications.

**Project Leader/Helper Guides** are developed to help the parent/mentor or group project leader provide supportive learning environments and additional learning experiences to youth in a given project area. Many of these guides provide group-oriented, leader-directed experiences to support group project meetings. They often include more in-depth subject content and several levels of activities to be used for facilitating learning among different ages of youth. An effective curriculum is not just focused on the youth, but provides for volunteer educational materials and experiences.

**Youth Project Reporting forms** include several age-appropriate statewide reporting tools to help youth collect and record project experiences consistently from county to county and across all project areas of interest. They include the following:

**My 4-H Project Summary** [4H GCM 11] is designed for youth ages five to seven. This Report Summary gives these youngest 4-H members the opportunity to summarize *all* completed projects for the year for club and county recognition.

**My 4-H Project Report** is designed for youth ages eight and up. There is an appropriate report form for each age group:

- *My Junior 4-H Report Project* [4H GCR 12] (for eight- to ten-year-olds)
- *My Intermediate 4-H Report Project* [4H GCR 13] (for eleven- to thirteen-year-olds)
- *My Senior 4-H Report Project* [4H GCR 14] (for fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds)

This report requires youth to complete a summary report for *each completed project* for recognition. The report includes the completed 4-H Project Manual, photos of their project work, and a short written story about their experiences.

**Building My 4-H Portfolio** [4H GCR 16] is a cumulative report for youth ages eight and up to use to record the history of their 4-H experiences over time. This reporting tool will help teens who have been engaged in 4-H for many years to keep a record of activities and accomplishments. This can then be used to help them complete the senior level (ages fourteen and up) *Florida 4-H Portfolio*, scholarship applications, or their first resume.

**The Florida 4-H Portfolio** [4H GCMR 31] is designed for youth ages fourteen and up to complete summary of all 4-H program experiences. The portfolio includes completing an "application form", creating a resume, and preparing a two- to three-page narrative statement.

This process is supported by a youth guide entitled "*Marketing You!*" [4H GCMR 30]. It guides 4-H'ers through reporting and applying their 4-H skills and experiences as they create a portfolio. This process prepares participants to enter the workforce and is similar to the one youths will go through when they apply for their first jobs. These portfolios are evaluated at the state level, with top entrants invited to interview for national award trips as a final tribute to 4-Hers' project work and accomplishments. Awards are provided in seven overall 4-H project areas annually. These categories are:

- Achievement (areas of interest that do not fit the remaining categories)
- Animal Sciences
- Citizenship and Civic Engagement
- Environmental Education/Plant Sciences
- Individual, Family and Consumer Sciences, including Healthy Lifestyle Choices
- Leadership and Communication

- Science and Technology

### Summary

Further information and training is provided to faculty, staff, and volunteers to support youth learning through projects. Project curricula, project events and activities, and project recognition provide the foundation for a youth's opportunities to develop life skills through 4-H. However, active participation in local club meetings, engagement in community service activities, and involvement in leadership opportunities provided by the county program can also help youth make contributions to their own development and to the betterment of their community and world. 4-H provides many other

opportunities to support and recognize these experiences.

### Resources

Hendricks, P. 1998. Developing Youth Curriculum Using the Targeting Life Skills Model.

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/4H/lifeskills/>

If you are a 4-H parent or volunteer seeking further information, please contact your local county 4-H Extension Office. Many supporting materials are also available from the Florida 4-H website at <http://www.Florida4H.org>.