

Studies of Life Skills in 4-H: What Do They Tell Us?

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Life skills are an important component of 4-H Youth Development programs. These skills allow individuals to respond to situations they experience in life and are applicable in more than one setting. The youth at the *Celebration of Youth* on October 22 spoke eloquently of the life skills they have learned. They are powerful examples that 4-H is a community of young people across America who are learning citizenship, leadership, and life skills.

What does the research say about the development of life skills in 4-H? Overall, studies of life skills in 4-H indicate that participation in 4-H has been positively related to life skill development. Although these studies have taken a variety of approaches (e.g., alumni, participants vs. nonparticipants, specific populations such as campers, and surveys and interviews of stakeholders), taken collectively, several themes are apparent. Major themes that appear are that participants (1) develop responsibility, even at a young age; (2) develop leadership skills; (3) develop social skills, such as teamwork; (4) gain useful and practical skills; (5) that skills increase as participation increases; and (6) that those in leadership roles developed skills to a greater extent.

Following are summaries of articles from the *Journal of Extension* and other sources. In addition a complete citation and a link to the publication (where available) is provided.

Astroth & Haynes (2002): In a study comparing 4-H and non 4-H participants in Montana, 4-H youth were found to be more involved as leaders in their school and community and to help other people. They were also more likely to set goals, try new things, and take responsibility for their actions. Furthermore, they had developed useful and practical skills such as good record keeping skills, speaking with ease in front of others, knowing how to organize their work, knowing how to plan ahead, and managing money wisely.

Astroth, K. A., & Haynes, G. W. (2002). More than cows and cooking: Newest research shows the impact of 4-H. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 40(4). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002august/a6.shtml>

Boyd, Herring, & Briers (1992): 4-H Club members' perceptions of their development of leadership life skills were significantly higher than the perceptions of non-4-H youth in this Texas study. These 13- to 19-year-old members' level of leadership life skill development increased as their participation in 4-H activities increased. While the correlations were significant, they were moderate for leadership and in the low range for communicating, making decisions, working with groups, and understanding self.

Boyd, B. L., Herring, D. R., & Briers, G. E. (1992). Developing life skills in youth. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 30(4). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1992winter/a4.html>

Cantrell, Heinshon, & Doebler (1989): Rather than comparing 4-H and non 4-H members, this Pennsylvania study examined potential differences based on the level of participation within 4-H. Teens participating generally and teens in leadership roles were compared on their development of 10 life skill clusters. Teens gained more when they assumed leadership roles than from general participation, and they gained more at each successive level of participation and leadership (i.e., from club to county, and from county to beyond-county).

Cantrell, J., Heinshon, A. L., & Doebler, M. K. (1989). Is it worth the costs: Going beyond the local 4-H club. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 27(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1989spring/a4.html>

Ferrari & Fogt (2004): This study of Ohio 4-H teens examined teens' community service experiences. Teens reported that skills for working in a group and organizational skills were what they learned the most. Youth who engaged in more service experiences were more likely to learn about the community, to improve teamwork skills, and to report a greater number of gains from their experience.

Ferrari, T. M., & Fogt, N. S. (2004). 4-H teens' participation in community service experiences: Motivations, roles, and outcomes. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Ferrari, Hogue, & Scheer (2004): Using qualitative methods, parents of Ohio 4-H Cloverbuds were interviewed to explore their perceptions of life skills gained by their children. Enhancing life skills was important to parents. They stressed the importance of 4-H as an environment where children are having fun while learning important skills that are beneficial now and later in life. By participating in Cloverbuds, their children have developed independence and social skills (e.g., talking in front of groups). This study also points out that parents can be tapped as a source of information about young children, who would have difficulty responding to surveys.

Ferrari, T. M., Hogue, C. A., & Scheer, S. D. (2004). Parent perceptions of life skills development in the 4-H Cloverbud program. *Journal of Extension*, 42(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2004june/rb6.shtml>

Fox, Schroeder, & Lodl (2003): According to Nebraska 4-H alumni, their 4-H Club involvement had the most influence on the development of responsibility, which was reported by nearly 6 in 10 of the respondents. Other skills identified by over half the participants were product production skills, ability to handle competition, and ability to meet new people. Alumni also indicated that they gained a wide variety of leadership, technical, relationship, and communication skills.

Fox, J., Schroeder, D., & Lodl, K. (2003). Life skills development through 4-H clubs: The perspective of 4-H alumni. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 41(6). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003december/rb2.shtml>

Garst & Bruce (2003): Virginia 4-H campers and their parents were surveyed to identify camping outcomes through a statewide survey. Campers indicated that 4-H camp participation helped them most in the areas of making new friends, developing new skills, and becoming more independent. Responsibility was the primary benefit that parents noted regarding their child's 4-H camp participation.

Garst, B. A., & Bruce, F. A. (2003). Identifying 4-H camping outcomes using a standardized evaluation process across multiple educational centers. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 41(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003june/rb2.shtml>

Scheer & Lafontaine (1999): This study provided a general sense that adults associated with the 4-H Cloverbud program in Ohio (i.e., parents, volunteers, and Extension professionals) believed it was beneficial for the Cloverbud age group.

Scheer, S. D., & Lafontaine, K. (1999). Stakeholder satisfaction with a 4-H Extension program for five- to eight-year-old children. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 37(5). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1999october/rb2.html>

Seevers & Dormody (1995): This study examined the leadership life skills development of a random sample of senior 4-H members in three Western states. Participation in 4-H leadership activities, achievement expectancy, ethnicity, and gender were found to contribute to leadership life skills development. Members were found to have the most involvement in implementing leadership activities, with lesser involvement in evaluating and planning. They identified proportionately more involvement in holding office and teaching younger members.

Seevers, B. S., & Dormody, T. J. (1995). Leadership life skills development: Perceptions of senior 4-H youth. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 33(4). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1995august/rb1.html>

Ward (1996): Recent 4-H animal science alumni in New Jersey were surveyed regarding life skills development obtained through their 4-H participation. Respondents reported that animal science projects had a great deal of influence in their development of responsibility.

Ward, C. K. (1996). Life skill development related to participation in 4-H animal science projects. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 34(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1996april/rb2.html>