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Life Skill Development Through 4-H Clubs: The Perspective of 4-H Alumni

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly important to document the impact of 4-H programming. In order to do this, a mixed model survey was administered to 264 4-H alumni. The purpose of the study was to determine if 4-H alumni perceived themselves as having gained life skills through the 4-H Club experience. Results showed that 4-H Club membership did have an influence on the development of all 32 life skills identified. These findings can be used to share 4-H program impact and how club participation plays a role in the development of youth.

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Background

One of the most pressing issues facing youth-serving organizations such as 4-H is how to best support youth in becoming productive, contributing individuals of society. Leffert, Saito, Blyth, and Kroenke (1996) found the experiences young people have during early adolescence provide the foundation on which they develop their personalities and life skills. Early adolescence is a time of rapid change in young people, hence, this is often an excellent opportunity to make a positive impact upon their development.

Because 4-H reaches youth in early adolescence, 4-H has the opportunity to significantly influence the development of young people. The importance of reaching these youth is documented in a study by Ladewig and Thomas (1987) indicating that skills and attitudes formed during 4-H carry into adulthood.

The mission of 4-H is to develop life skills among young people (Cox, 1996). In fact, life skills, the abilities that individuals learn that help them to be successful in living a productive and satisfying life, serve as the foundation for the 4-H program (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992). A number of studies have tried to determine if participation in non-formal educational programs such as 4-H have an impact on youth (Astroth, 1996; Boyd, 1991; Hanna, 1988; Heinsohn & Cantrell, 1986; Ladewig & Thomas, 1987; Sarver, Johnson, & Verma, 2000; Sawyer, 1987; Steele & Everson, 1978).

For example, Astroth (1996) found that 4-H effectively develops life skills in 4-H members. His research showed that 4-H Clubs were effective in helping youth develop critical life skills such as decision-making, responsibility, interpersonal skills, a service ethic, and social skills. In addition, 4-H Clubs emphasized developing practical, technical skills. Members often cited the hands-on learning opportunities available through the club experience as vital to their skill development.

Heinsohn and Cantrell (1986) found that 4-H members perceived themselves as having developed "good" levels of leadership, communication, and personal development skills. Boyd (1991) found that 4-H Club members rated their skill development higher on the scales of working with groups, understanding self, communicating, and making decisions. Interestingly, youth who participated in Boyd's study rated themselves lower on the leadership scale.

Within the past several years, major changes have resulted in increasing accountability demands upon all Cooperative Extension programming, including 4-H (Barkman & Machtmes, 2001). Funders at both state and federal levels have charged youth serving agencies to develop methods of evaluating their programs to document positive benefits of program participation. Appropriately, funders want to ensure that the programs they support are making a difference in the lives of the young people served. These changes have made it necessary for youth development professionals to be better prepared to measure, document, and articulate the impact of 4-H programs.

Purpose

With these thoughts in mind, the study described was designed to determine if 4-H alumni perceived themselves as having gained life skills through the 4-H Club experience and, if so, to what degree. The study featured examination of 32 life skills divided into four theme areas:

- Technical skills,
- Communication skills,
- Personal/social skills, and
- Leadership skills.

Methodology

The study used a descriptive, mixed model survey. The survey was developed utilizing data obtained from a focus group of 4-H volunteers, 4-H alumni, and Cooperative Extension staff. Coupled with the focus group data, life skills identified in the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1998) were reviewed.

Respondents shared their perceptions of life skill development as a result of their participation in the 4-H Club program. For the purpose of the study, content validity was established through a review of the instrument by a panel of experts. Chronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis score of .7966 was reported indicating valid data.

The population for this study was 4-H alumni from 17 southeast Nebraska counties who participated in a 4-H Club from 1982-1988. These 17 counties make up approximately 55% of the state's population. Extension staff provided the names and addresses of 4-H Club alumni. In identifying research participants, Extension staff were asked to select individuals who represented a wide variety of 4-H involvement, years of membership and project interests. The 4-H Club Impact Survey was then sent to these purposefully sampled 264 4-H Club alumni.

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative section of the survey included open-ended questions regarding the most important thing learned through the 4-H Club experience as well as a section asking respondents to share an interesting story about their 4-H experience. Qualitative data, gained through open-ended questions, was analyzed using a theme mapping process (Creswell, 2001).

Findings

Usable responses were obtained from 196 respondents, for a return rate of 74%. The 4-H alumni reported participating in 4-H from 3 to 13 years, with an average of 9.2 years. In terms of continued involvement in 4-H, less than one-fourth (22%) of the alumni are currently involved in 4-H in a volunteer capacity. Several alumni who aren't involved in 4-H currently indicated an interest in volunteering for 4-H on the survey.

Respondents rated the influence of their 4-H Club experience on life skill development on a four-point scale: 1 = primary influence, 2 = some influence, 3 = minor influence, and 4 = no influence. The life skills assessed were divided into the broad categories of technical skills, communication skills, personal/social skills, and leadership skills. Results showed that 4-H Club membership did have primary or some influence on the development of all 32 life skills identified in the survey (See Appendix A). For the purpose of this article, those life skills that were primarily influenced by 4-H Club membership are discussed (Table 1).

According to the data, 4-H Club involvement had the most influence on the development of responsibility, with 58.8% of the respondents indicating 4-H Club involvement as the primary influence on the development of this skill. In addition, the majority of 4-H alumni reported 4-H Club membership as the primary influence in: product production skills, the ability to handle

competition and gaining the ability to meet new people.

Leadership skills were primarily influenced by 4-H Club engagement for 46.3% of the respondents, while 46.0% reported primarily gaining project skills through the 4-H Club experience. Forty-five percent of the respondents reported 4-H Club membership as a primary influence on the development of sportsmanship and presentation skills. When it came to developing self-confidence and a willingness to try new things, 43.8% of the respondents indicated that 4-H Club membership was the primary influence in the development of these life skills.

Table 1.
Primary Influence of 4-H Club Experience on Alumni's Life Skill Development

Life Skills N=196	Primary Influence	Rank
Responsibility	58.8%	1
Product Production Skills	54.2%	2
Ability to Handle Competition	53.8%	3
Ability to Meet New People	50.3%	4
Working as a Family	47.8%	5
Leadership	46.3%	6
Project Skills	46%	7
Sportsmanship	45.6%	8
Presentation Skills	45.3%	9
Self Confidence	43.8%	10
Willingness to Try New Things	43.8%	10

The survey included an opportunity for 4-H Club alumni to list other technical, communication, personal, relationship, and leadership skills they developed as a result of their 4-H Club experience. In the four major areas of life skill development, respondents identified other skills not listed. Eighty-five percent of the 4-H Club alumni indicated that they had developed other leadership skills through their 4-H Club experience. In addition, 66.7% of the respondents reported that 4-H Club membership was a primary influence in other technical life skill development and communication skill development. Sixty percent of 4-H Club alumni reported that 4-H was the primary influence on other personal and relationship life skill development.

Technical Skills

In response to the question about what other technical skills 4-H alumni learned through the 4-H Club program, alumni identified a wide variety of technical skills, including those in consumer sciences, animal sciences, science and technology, environmental education, and plant sciences. "Cost comparison," "improving on mistakes," "dividing a project into workable tasks," and "quality of workmanship" were all shared as additional technical skills gained. When asked the most important thing gained from the 4-H Club experience, one 4-H Alumni shared: "I learned to produce quality products and can now use these for medical school."

Communication Skills

When asked what other communication skills they learned through the 4-H Club experience, 4-H alumni identified "asking questions," "ability to meet others outside of the county," and

"developing friendships that lasted into and past college." When asked to identify the most important thing learned through the 4-H Club experience, respondents shared:

- "I learned skills for effective communication: presentations and public speaking."
- "The most important things I learned were how to speak in front of a group and how to put a presentation together."

Personal and Social Skills

4-H alumni shared that they learned "to teach others" through 4-H Club involvement. When asked to identify the most important thing learned through the 4-H Club experience, alumni shared the following statements related to personal and social life skill development:

- "You can learn a lot by meeting new people and being exposed to new experiences."
- "Team work - everyone in the Club had to work together to get everything done."
- "Every person has great qualities and skills in which they can share with others."

Leadership Skills

In the leadership area, 4-H alumni indicated they gained "citizenship skills," "the ability to take orders," and "networking skills." When 4-H alumni were asked to identify the most important thing learned through the 4-H Club experience, leadership skills were often cited. One 4-H alumnus shared that "4-H was the building block of my leadership skills."

Overall Impact of the 4-H Club Experience

Several 4-H alumni provided strong testimonials supporting their 4-H Club experience. For example, one 4-H alumnus stated: "I strongly believe I wouldn't be where I'm today without 4-H." Several others commented on how 4-H shaped their philosophy of competition:

- "No matter if you win or lose, you are important and both winning and losing provide fun and learning."
- "Awards are not won at the fair. They are won at home. This is achieved through hard work, management and responsibilities."
- "Do your best and be proud of that, whether or not you win."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the 4-H Club experience does affect the development of life skills. These findings support research by Heinsohn and Cantrell (1986) and Boyd, Herring, and Briers (1992), which found that 4-H members perceived they had developed specific life skills through the 4-H experience. 4-H is a viable avenue for Cooperative Extension in developing young people to become capable, competent adults. Cooperative Extension staff and volunteers should continue to promote and support participation in 4-H Clubs as a means to develop life skills.

It is somewhat surprising that the majority of 4-H alumni involved in this study are not involved in 4-H today. With the positive influence 4-H had on the lives of many of these 4-H alumni, a golden opportunity for volunteer recruitment exists. Given the multiple states where these alumni now reside, a national 4-H alumni database could serve as a valuable tool to track and recruit volunteers for support of Cooperative Extension 4-H programs.

Future research should be conducted to:

- a. Investigate relationships among 4-H Club membership, life skill development, and participation by ethnicity and gender,
- b. Search for other predictors of life skill development, and
- c. Replicate research concerning life skill development with other youth development programs.

Cooperative Extension must continue to document the value that 4-H programs have on life skill development. As impact results are documented, the value of 4-H programs must be reported to funders and decision-makers, volunteers, parents, and potential members. It is through this documentation and reporting that the positive impact of 4-H on young people can be better understood by all.

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Appendix A: Life Skills Evaluated

Technical Skills

- Record Keeping
- Project Skills
- Preparing for a Career
- Producing a Product
- Evaluating a Product

Communication Skills

- Public Speaking Skills
- Presentation Skills
- Written Communication Skills

Personal/Social Skills

- Meeting New People
- Building Relationships
- Working with Caring Adults
- Working as a Family
- Handling Conflict
- Appreciate Others' Differences
- Self Confidence
- Respect for Self
- Willing to Try New Things
- Respect for Others and Property
- Sportsmanship
- Resiliency (Ability to bounce back)
- Critical Thinking
- Ability to Handle Competition
- Desire to Be Involved

- Managing Challenges
- Following Rules
- Social Skills

Leadership Skills

- Responsibility
- Leadership
- Organizational Skills
- Ability to Run a Meeting
- Time Management
- Following Through

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