The Impact of Utah 4-H on Positive Youth Development

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Abstract

4-H is the largest youth development program in the United States. Utah 4-H conducts programs guided by the principles of positive youth development to help youth across the state lead a successful life. This article discusses the impact of Utah 4-H on the wellbeing of youth.

Introduction

Youth wellbeing is consistently ranked as a high-priority issue by educational and community organizations (Brown & Moore, 2009). On a discussion of the Global Youth Wellbeing Index, Sharma (2017) found only 11% of youth across the globe experienced high levels of wellbeing. In addition, Sharma noted too few young people received the support they need to be successful in life. An emerging area within the broad issue of youth wellbeing is mental health.

The U.S. Surgeon General categorizes *youth mental health* as a major priority area, stating "one in three high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40% from 2009" (U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2021, p. 3). In Utah, youth mental health was identified as an urgent issue in several county-level needs assessments (e.g., Hawkins & Narine, 2022), and a statewide assessment (Narine et al., 2021). Through Utah 4-H, USU Extension is actively engaged in youth development programming to improve the overall wellbeing of Utah's youth.

Response and Target Audience

Serving over six million youth, 4-H is the largest youth development program in the U.S. (Flores-Lagunes & Timko, 2014). The mission of 4-H is to "empower youth to reach their full potential through working and learning in partnership with caring adults" (Flores-Lagunes & Timko, 2014, p. 6). Utah 4-H conducts direct programming to youth throughout the state using a "learn by doing" approach. With program coordinators and adult volunteers in every county, youth are provided with a wide range of out-of-school programming opportunities geared toward positive youth development.

4-H Utah program areas include agriculture, environmental, and animal sciences, civic engagement and leadership, family and consumer sciences, healthy living, and science, technology, engineering, and math. Utah 4-H seeks to set youth on thriving trajectories based on their interests. The role of 4-H professionals is to help youth find their interests, contribute to their community and greater society, build their knowledge and skill capacity, and expand their social networks. Environments centered around youth interests, program quality principles, and developmental relationships create a thriving trajectory toward developmental outcomes. This process is summarized as the "6Cs" of Positive Youth Development (Lerner & Lerner, 2012): *Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring, and Contribution*.

Utah 4-H serves youth between the ages of 5 to 18. Following the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), 4-H programs are designed specifically for youth based on their age range and members are categorized into the following groups; Cloverbud (Ages 5 – 7), Junior (Ages 8 – 10), Intermediate (Ages 11 – 13), and Senior (Ages 14 – 18). The distinction between member ages ensures learning occurs by accounting for the developmental phases of youth. By considering program content and context, Utah 4-H is geared towards improving the wellbeing of young people by creating environments where youth can thrive. Therefore, this article provides evidence of the impact of Utah 4-H on positive youth development.

Outcomes and Impact

An impact evaluation of Utah 4-H was conducted in 2022. The target population was 4-H youth members, and the sample size was 442 youth ($n = 442$). The sample consisted of youth from grades 5 to 12, and the mean age of participants was 13 years old. All Utah counties were represented except for Emery, Grand, and San Juan counties. An online questionnaire was used to gather outcome data from youth, and 4-H program coordinators throughout the state assisted in administering the survey. Descriptive statistics and logistic regression were used to analyze the data.

Table 1 provides a summary of the short-term outcomes of Utah 4-H. Results showed the majority of youth who attended 4-H learned about responsibility, teamwork, leadership, communication skills, problem-solving, goal setting, concern for others, and healthy lifestyle choices.

Table 1: General Short-term Learning Outcomes of Utah 4-H

At 4-H, I learned about…	Frequency (%)
Responsibility	87
Teamwork	80
Leadership	79
Communication skills	77
Problem-solving	76
Goal setting	75
Concern for others	62
Healthy lifestyle choices	54

Table 2 provides a closer look at the learning outcomes of Utah 4-H youth. Descriptive results showed most 4-H youth agreed or strongly agreed they learned about making responsible choices, being responsible for their actions, working in a team, maintaining a strong work ethic, helping their community, the importance of mental and physical health, and career options.

Table 2: Specific Short-term Learning Outcomes of Utah 4-H

At 4-H, I learned…	Frequency (%)*				
	SD	*D*	*N*	*A*	*SA*
...to make responsible choices	6	1	8	26	59
...it is important to be responsible for my actions	9	1	8	21	62
...to work in a team	9	3	7	22	60
...it is important to maintain a strong work ethic	7	2	9	24	58
...about ways to help my community	5	4	11	27	53
...problem-solving skills	8	5	9	28	51
...about the importance of being mentally healthy	7	6	17	28	42
...about the importance of being physically healthy	8	5	21	27	40
...about career options	7	9	22	33	30

Note. SD = Strongly disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither agree/disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly agree

A logistic regression was used to assess the long-term impact of Utah 4-H. Youth were categorized into two mutually exclusive groups based on their level of engagement in Utah 4-H; (a) *Lower engagement* = > 1 year of involvement in 4-H *and* > 3 hours a week spent on 4-H activities ($n = 305$), and (b) *Higher engagement* = ≤ 1 year of involvement in 4-H *and* ≤ 3 hours a week spent on 4-H activities ($n = 117$).

With age held constant, statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$) of the logistic regression models showed youth with *higher engagement* in Utah 4-H were about 3 times more likely to learn about responsibility, 98% more likely to learn about problem-solving, almost 2 times more likely to learn about goal-setting, 98% more likely to learn about concern for others, and 96% more likely to learn about being responsible for their actions.

Table 3 provides a descriptive summary of the differences in statistically significant impact indicators between youth with higher and lower engagement in Utah 4-H. Compared to those with lower engagement, youth with higher engagement in Utah 4-H experienced a 25% increase in their concern for others, a 22% increase in their goal-setting skills, and a 16% increase in their problem-solving skills.

Table 3: The difference in Impact by Youth Engagement with Utah 4-H

Indicator	Outcomes (%)		% Increase
	Lower Engagement	*Higher Engagement*	
Concern for others	59	74	25
Goal Setting	72	88	22
Problem Solving	73	85	16
Responsibility	85	96	13
Being responsible for actions	80	89	11
Maintaining a strong work ethic	80	88	10

The long-term impact of Utah 4-H can be summarized by the 6Cs of Positive Youth Development. Results from a series of logistic regression models showed higher engagement in

Utah 4-H led to a statistically significant increase in the odds of *all* indicators of positive youth development. With age held constant, results showed youth with higher engagement in Utah 4-H were 70% more likely to demonstrate higher *Competence*, 89% more likely to demonstrate higher *Character*, 80% more likely to demonstrate higher *Connection*, 97% more likely to demonstrate higher *Caring*, almost 2 times more likely to demonstrate higher *Confidence*, and 92% more likely to demonstrate higher *Contribution* compared to youth with lower engagement.

Table 4 provides a descriptive summary of the difference in 6Cs outcomes based on youth level of engagement in Utah 4-H. Compared to those with lower engagement, youth with higher engagement in 4-H had a 31% increase in their skills related to confidence, a 28% increase in their contribution, and a 23% increase in their caring.

Table 4: Differences in 6Cs Outcomes by Engagement

6Cs	Impact (%)		% Increase
	Lower Engagement	*Higher Engagement*	
Confidence	61	80	31
Contribution	53	68	28
Caring	61	75	23
Character	68	80	18
Connection	72	83	15
Competence	71	81	14

Note. See Appendix I for a summary infographic of the results.

Public Value

Results of the annual evaluation indicated youth benefited in a variety of meaningful ways from their involvement in Utah 4-H. In addition, findings showed the impact of 4-H membership was greater for youth who were more involved in 4-H programs; as youth spent more years in 4-H and time on 4-H projects, they were more likely to demonstrate higher levels on all indicators of positive youth development. While these findings provide a glimpse of the role of 4-H on youth wellbeing, the intangible benefits of attending events, making friends, engaging with volunteer mentors, and gaining a sense of belonging may lead to additional benefits for youth.

Next Steps

With a rich history of serving as the youth branch of USU Extension, Utah 4-H aims to fulfill the land grant mission by giving all young people access to opportunity. Utah 4-H is actively exploring ways of moving youth through the 4-H Pathway to higher engagement while creating new connections with minority youth and underrepresented groups. There are continuing actions taken to strengthen partnerships with community grassroots organizations, active discussions on implementing culturally responsive education, and state-level discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Ongoing efforts made to ensure an inclusive and welcoming environment in 4-H will benefit all youth as Utah 4-H works towards improving the wellbeing of youth.
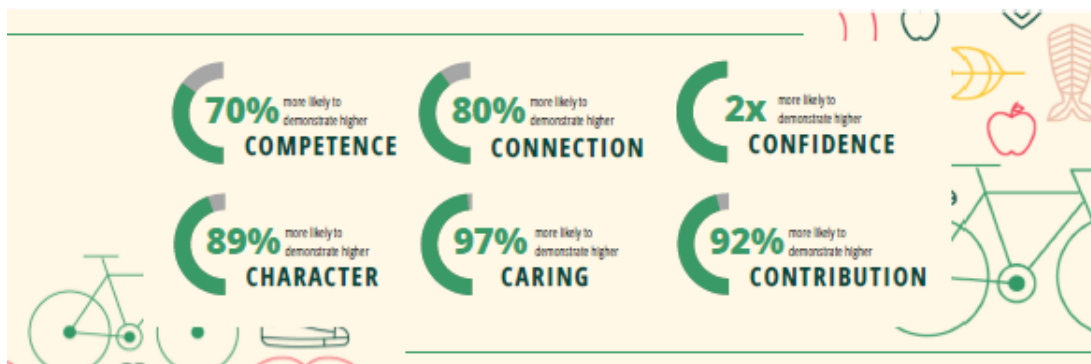
APPENDIX I

2022 UTAH 4-H IMPACTS

Utah 4-H served over **8,500 youth** in 2022. A recent impact evaluation showed that when compared to 4-H peers with less engagement, youth with higher engagement in Utah 4-H are...

3x more likely to learn about **RESPONSIBILITY**

98% more likely to learn about **PROBLEM SOLVING**

96% more likely to learn about **BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR ACTIONS**

98% more likely to learn about **CONCERN FOR OTHERS**

2x more likely to learn about **GOAL SETTING**

Utah 4-H programs are guided by the six principles of Positive Youth Development: **Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring, and Contribution,** commonly known as the 6 C's (Lerner & Lerner, 2012). The 2022 impact evaluation showed that when compared to 4-H peers with less engagement, Utah 4-H youth with higher engagement are...

70% more likely to demonstrate higher **COMPETENCE**

80% more likely to demonstrate higher **CONNECTION**

2x more likely to demonstrate higher **CONFIDENCE**

89% more likely to demonstrate higher **CHARACTER**

97% more likely to demonstrate higher **CARING**

92% more likely to demonstrate higher **CONTRIBUTION**

*Lower engagement: ≤ 1 year of involvement and ≤ 3 hours a week
Higher engagement: > 1 year of involvement and > 3 hours a week

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