

The Iowa 4-H Youth Development Experience

Guiding Principles

Vision – A world in which youth and adults learn, grow, and work together as catalysts for positive change.

Mission – 4-H empowers youth to reach their full potential working and learning in partnership with caring adults.

Values – We, the youth and adults of the 4-H movement, value

- Youth as powerful members of society
- Youth and adults as caring partners
- Learning as a lifelong commitment
- Diversity and social conscience
- Doing our best and making it better



What We Believe

4-H youth programs provide opportunities for youth to develop skills they can use now and throughout their life. Iowa 4-H builds upon a century of experience as it fosters positive youth development that is based on the needs and strengths of youth, their families, and communities.

Iowa 4-H follows the principles of experiential learning, and draws on the knowledge base of Iowa State University and other institutions of higher education in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Iowa 4-H Program's vision and mission statements clearly view youth as partners working *with* staff and volunteers, and as full participants in planning and working for individual and community change.

What Are the Developmental Needs of Youth that the 4-H Program Addresses?

Youth development research emphasizes the importance of meeting the four basic human needs of belonging, generosity, independence, and mastery. Studies indicate that youth whose needs are met in positive ways are likely to develop into active citizens and contributing members of their families and communities. The Iowa 4-H program ensures that every youth will have the opportunity to participate in 4-H experiences that strengthen a young person's sense of belonging, generosity, independence, and mastery.

- **Belonging** – Youth need to know they are cared about by others and feel a sense of connection to others in group settings. 4-H gives youth the opportunity to feel physically and emotionally safe while actively participating in a group.
- **Generosity** – Youth need to feel their lives have meaning and purpose. By exploring 4-H community service and citizenship activities, youth can connect to communities and learn to give back to others.
- **Independence** – Youth need to know that they are able to influence people and events through decision-making and action. By exercising independence through 4-H leadership opportunities, youth mature in self-discipline and responsibility and learn to better understand themselves.
- **Mastery** – Youth need to feel and believe they are capable, and experience success at solving problems and meeting challenges to develop their self-confidence. Through the exploration of ideas and activities related to their interests, youth learn skills and participate in experiences that help them make positive life choices for their future.

Essential Elements of the 4-H Experience

Iowa 4-H youth programs address the needs of young people by focusing on their strengths and capacities and the essential elements of positive youth development programming.¹ The essential elements of a 4-H experience are the “best practices” that help staff and volunteers address the four basic developmental needs of youth. The 4-H program’s vision, mission, and values emphasize the importance of youth and adults working as partners to improve the group experience as well. A positive youth-adult partnership ensures that the essential elements are being practiced in 4-H programming.

¹ The National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team reviewed the basic and applied research on characteristics of effective programs for youth development. From this process, eight elements critical to positive youth development and central to the 4-H experience emerged.

Resources

- Essential Elements of 4-H (1999)
- Meeting Needs of Youth, 4H-117 (1999)
- National 4-H Strategic Plan (2001)
- Prepared and Engaged Youth (2001)
- National 4-H Impact Assessment Project (2001)



- *Caring adult.* A caring adult acts as an advisor, guide and mentor. The adult helps set boundaries and expectations for young people. The caring adults could be called supporter, friend, and advocate. This element supports the need for **belonging**.
- *Safe environment.* Youth should not fear physical or emotional harm while participating in the 4-H experience whether from the learning environment itself, adults, other participants, or spectators. This element supports the need for **belonging**.
- *Mastery.* **Mastery** is the building of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and then demonstrating the competent use of the knowledge and skills in the manner of a proficient practitioner. The level of mastery is a process over time.
- *Service.* Finding oneself begins with losing the self in the service of others. Service is a way for members to gain exposure to the larger community, indeed the world itself. It is necessary to actively practice and uphold service in order to develop a sense of **generosity**.
- *Self-determination.* Believing that one has impact over life’s events rather than passively submitting to the will and whims of others is self-determination. Young people must foster a personal sense of influence over their own lives, exercising their potential to become self-directing, autonomous adults. This element directly supports youth’s need for **independence**.
- *Inclusiveness.* An inclusive environment is one that allows a sense of **belonging** to develop, encourages and supports its members, and offers encouragement with positive and specific feedback. Healthy groups celebrate the success of all members taking pride in the collective efforts of all.
- *Futuristic.* The ability to see oneself in the future is to harness the hope and optimism to shape life choices to facilitate the transition into active participation in future events. It allows for the development of **independence**.
- *Engagement.* An engaged youth is one who is mindful of the subject area, while building interpersonal and intrapersonal relations and connections in order to develop greater understanding. Through self-reflection, the brain has the ability to self-correct and learn from experience. The engaged learner has a high degree of self-motivation and an unending capacity to create. This element has its basis in both **mastery and independence**.