The Iowa 4-H Youth Development Experience

Guiding Principles

Vision – Preparing Iowa’s youth to be successful, contributing members of society.

Mission – 4-H empowers youth to reach their full potential through youth-adult partnerships and research-based experiences.

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 over 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.

- 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.

- 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.

- 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.

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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.

- **A Caring Adult** is actively involved as an advisor, guide, coach, and mentor. He or she helps set boundaries and expectations for young people and could also be described as a supporter, friend, and advocate. This element supports the need for belonging.
- **A Safe Environment** exists when youth do not fear physical or emotional harm while participating in the 4-H experience—from the learning environment itself, adults, other participants, or spectators. This element supports the need for belonging.
- **An Inclusive Setting** fosters a sense of belonging in all members. It encourages and supports the 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.
- **Mastery** includes building of knowledge, skills, wisdom, and attitudes, and then demonstrating their use. The level of mastery depends on the ability or interests of the individual youth. It is a process that evolves, sometimes over a period of years, and is not a one-time experience. This element supports the 4-H concept of hands-on experiential learning to gain mastery.
- **Service** to others has been a part of the 4-H experience for over a century. Its premise is that finding oneself often begins with giving service to others. Service is a way for members to gain exposure and contribute to the larger community and the world itself. Service supports the need for generosity.
- **Self-Determination** is believing that one has impact over life’s events rather than passively submitting to the whims of others. Youth learn about themselves, their talents and interests. Youth must develop a sense of influence over their choices as well as the consequences of those choices. Then they can become self-directing, autonomous adults. This element supports the need for independence.
- **Planning for the Future** is crucial to the development of young people. A view of a positive future has hope and optimism to shape life choices and to facilitate the transition into active participation in future events. It allows for the development of independence.
- **Engaged Learning** is essential in learning and life. An engaged youth 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 inexhaustible capacity to create. This element has its basis in both mastery and independence.

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)

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