

**4-H Volunteer Leader Skills and Implications for Global 4-H Program Development**

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**Abstract**

*When 4-H originated in 1902, the intent was to improve agricultural practices and enhance quality of life for rural American families through youth development. Its success is evident; it remains the oldest and largest youth development organization in the U.S. with an increasing international component. Over 80 countries currently participate in 4-H programs, the majority of which maintain an agrarian and rural quality of life focus in program goals and curricula. Contemporary 4-H programs also convene youth from diverse ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds through international youth exchange programs.*

*A unique feature of 4-H worldwide is its reliance upon adult volunteer leaders who teach and guide youth. This study reports the results of an assessment of volunteer leaders' skills to promote positive youth development among 4-H youth in the U.S. The authors developed survey items to assess seven adult skills that foster positive youth development among youth: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure for youth development; opportunities for youth to learn about supportive relationships; opportunities for youth to belong; opportunities for youth to learn about positive social norms; opportunities for building life skills; and support for efficacy and mattering.*

*Study results indicate that parents who participate in 4-H as volunteer leaders tend to rate their skills to work with youth significantly higher than parents who do not volunteer to lead. These results provide important information for Extension 4-H agents in the U.S. and abroad who recruit, screen, educate and manage adult volunteer leaders to promote positive development among 4-H youth.*

Keywords: Positive Youth Development, Adult Skills, International 4-H

### Introduction

The 4-H program is one of the oldest and largest youth development organizations in the U.S. Over a century old, 4-H has expanded its enrollment nationwide to 7 million members, 90,000 community clubs and 560,000 volunteer leaders. Although research-based knowledge focusing on agriculture sciences remains a traditional priority in rural 4-H programs, contemporary 4-H strives to reach diverse youth in urban areas as well. It also features a more expansive and sophisticated selection of educational topics.

Since 1946, 4-H organizations have expanded worldwide with activity in over 80 countries. In the majority of developing countries in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, 4-H has maintained its original mission of improving rural living conditions through youth development focused on agriculture and consumer science education. In much of Europe, 4-H has focused on agricultural technology, innovative practices and leadership development involving youth living on small farms and ranches. International 4-H curricula, however, have continued evolving to meet changing needs and diverse cultures. Japan's 4-H program, for example, has provided international exchange opportunities with the U.S. and other countries to enable 4-H youth to learn another language and experience cultural diversity (Radhakrishna, & Ingram, 2004). In fact, recent proposals suggest 4-H take the lead as an international youth organization to infuse global literacy incorporating curricula on community development, geography, agricultural trade, religion, language, culture, and family structure and relationships (Ingram, & Radhakrishna, 2004).

Research suggests that 4-H's strength over other youth development programs is its use of hands-on educational activities and nearly exclusive reliance upon adult volunteer leadership (Fritz, Karmazin, Barbuto, & Burrow, 2003; Hutchins, SeEVERS, & Van Leeuwen, 2002). Volunteer

leaders directly interact with and teach 4-H youth. They volunteer their time and expertise without monetary compensation and participate in several different aspects of the 4-H program. They organize, initiate, sustain and sometimes develop new, innovative 4-H projects. Volunteers also recruit 4-H members and support their participation in a variety of educational, competitive and community service activities.

Parents of 4-H members provide the largest pool of potential 4-H volunteer leaders. Many parents of 4-H members become involved in 4-H informally by helping their child participate in 4-H events. Some are recruited or volunteer to serve as leaders to share their knowledge and expertise in particular subject areas and direct 4-H projects.

New volunteer leaders may receive some education and preparation prior to assuming their program responsibilities. However, in the U.S., educational content and quality varies from state to state and even within states. Thus, leader preparation can vary substantially in terms of content, quality and requirements. For example, while some training may emphasize stages of cognitive child development, other trainings may simply explain requirements for completing a particular 4-H project, such as attendance at 4-H competitions and materials needed for 4-H record books.

Presumably, volunteer leaders experience "on-the-job" training in their role interacting with and teaching 4-H youth. Yet, while schoolteachers typically complete a structured certification process to work with youth, no such certification or clearly defined education is required for 4-H volunteer leaders (Yohalem, 2003; Walker, 2003). To ensure the long-term success of 4-H and maintain its program quality and integrity both in the U.S. and abroad, it is important to examine and understand the specific skills that help 4-H leaders to promote positive development among 4-H youth. Understanding these skills and the

role 4-H plays in preparing volunteer leaders to promote youth development can provide important future directions for 4-H organizations worldwide.

### **Purpose**

This study examined adult skills to promote positive skill development among 4-H youth. Specifically, it compares perceived skills of parents who volunteer to serve as 4-H leaders with parents who do not volunteer as leaders to determine if differences exist. Leader preparation, in addition to experience as a volunteer leader, may strengthen specific skills needed to work effectively with 4-H youth, suggesting future directions for 4-H organizations worldwide.

### **Methods**

#### *Participants*

Participants in a statewide study (Nevada) included all parents of currently enrolled 4-H youth in that state. A state enrollment list provided mailing addresses for the postal survey. Duplicate addresses, representing more than one 4-H member per household, were eliminated in order to provide one address per household for a total survey sample of 3,074 households. This number represents the most exact and inclusive sample of current Nevada 4-H parents. For the purpose of this study, parents were asked to indicate whether they currently served as volunteer leaders. Those parents who indicated that they did not volunteer as leaders were categorized as “non-leaders.”

#### *Instrumentation: Adult Skills*

Survey items to measure adult skills were based upon the conceptual framework from the National Academy of Science report, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Eccles, & Appleton-Gootman, 2002). This report synthesizes a wide array of youth development research, presents characteristics associated with successful youth programs and represents

the most current framework for understanding how community programs can enhance the positive development of youth. The conceptual framework is composed of eight critical indicators of quality youth development programs. The recent National Working with Teens Study (Killian, Evans, Letner, & Brown, 2004) used these critical indicators to develop eight parallel sets of items to assess skills that adults working with youth possess that foster youth development.

For this study, these items were adapted for use with 4-H volunteer leaders. In the process, the authors eliminated one set of skills pertaining to the integration of family, school and community efforts, since this indicator did not apply directly to the role of 4-H volunteers. Table 1 illustrates the resulting seven skill groups and associated individual questionnaire items included in the survey. These skill sets are: physical and psychological safety (SAFE); appropriate structure (STRUC); supportive relationships (RELAT); opportunities to belong (BLNG); positive social norms (NORM); opportunities for skill building (SKILL); and support for efficacy and mattering (MATR) (Eccles, & Appleton-Gootman, 2002; Killian, et al., 2004). Each question used a Likert-type scale using a five-point equal weighting, with 1 being “I need a lot of improvement at this,” and 5 being “I am very good at this.” In addition, each item included the choice “Don’t Know.”

A panel of Extension 4-H professionals reviewed earlier drafts of the questionnaire and modifications were made based upon their recommendations. The purpose of the reviews was to identify missing attributes and to check for clarity and comprehension of survey questions.

#### *Procedure*

In 2003, all 4-H parents received in the mail a two-page (front and back) questionnaire with instructions and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. A cover letter was included that explained the

purpose of the survey, ensured confidentiality and thanked them for their input. Budgetary constraints precluded repeated attempts to contact survey recipients who did not respond to the initial mailing.

Other methods to increase participation rates included news releases and reminders in local newspapers, the statewide Extension newsletter, and local 4-H newsletters. The newspaper and newsletter articles notified 4-H parents about the survey so they could watch for it in the mail, complete the survey and mail it back as directed. The survey cover letter included a personal message from the Dean of Cooperative Extension encouraging participation in the survey.

The one-time data collection protocol received exemption from the University of Nevada, Office of Human Research Protection, in part based on participant anonymity. Any attempt to conduct a follow-up mailing would require an identification number that corresponded with recipients' names and addresses and a signed consent to participate. While budgetary constraints were the deciding factor in precluding follow-up mailings to non-responding contacts, confidentiality issues were also a concern for this audience. The one-time mailing procedure ensured complete confidentiality.

## Results

Of the 3,074 parents surveyed, 576 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 19% response rate. Since we did not attempt to contact the survey recipients or conduct multiple follow-up surveys, this is considered a reasonably robust response rate. Of the 576 parents who responded, 322 (56%) indicated they currently served as volunteer leaders and 254 (44%) indicated they were not volunteer leaders.

Cronbach's coefficient alpha, an estimate internal consistency or reliability of the entire set of skills (18 items) was calculated and found to be high ( $r = .944$ ) (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). This high score indicates that the survey items as a group are reliable indicators of the skills assessed. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha scores on the seven skill subscales were all acceptable, ranging from approximately .7 for "opportunities to belong" to .9 for "providing social norms."

Table 1 illustrates volunteer leaders' and non-leaders' ranked mean scores for the 18 skills included on the survey. Both volunteer leaders and non-leaders rated their skills to work with 4-H youth relatively high, with most scores averaging 4 or higher on a 5-point scale. However, for 17 of 18 skills, volunteer leaders rated their skills higher than did non-leaders.

Table 1

*Volunteer Leader and Non-leader Ranked Mean Scores of Adult Youth Development Skills*

Skill Sets	Questions	Leader			Non-leader		
		Rank	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	Rank	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>
SAFE	Make sure 4-H facility is safe	1	4.42	317	3	4.07	210
RELAT	Listen to youth	2	4.34	325	1	4.25	230
NORM	Ensure 4-H youth act appropriately	3	4.31	323	2	4.21	219
BLNG	Help youth feel important to 4-H program	4	4.29	320	4	4.05	216
NORM	Let youth know I have high expectations of them	5	4.27	324	4	4.05	219
BLNG	Help 4-H youth feel part of a special group	6	4.26	324	4	4.05	222
RELAT	I'm easy to approach	7	4.24	323	6	4.01	226
STRUC	Make sure 4-H youth are occupied	8	4.19	318	12	3.67	208
SAFE	Keep youth from bullying each other	9	4.11	319	5	4.02	224
STRUC	Provide age-appropriate learning activities	10	4.10	316	10	3.70	205
MATR	Encourage youth to take leadership	11	4.08	322	10	3.86	217
SPRL	Understand "youth" point of view	11	4.08	321	7	4.06	229
STRUC	Conduct activities that challenge youth	12	4.03	322	12	3.67	205
RELAT	Relate well to youth from different cultures and backgrounds	13	4.02	314	8	3.92	217
SAFE	Manage conflict between youth	14	3.92	320	9	3.81	231
SKILL	Teach 4-H youth life skills	15	3.91	317	11	3.69	205
SAFE	Keep youth from hurting feelings	16	3.85	319	9	3.89	228
SKILL	Teach 4-H youth social skills	17	3.85	318	13	3.58	205

Since we surveyed the entire census of 4-H parents (including leaders and non-leaders) statewide, a nonparametric test (Mann-Whitney U) was used to measure differences between the two groups. The test resulted in statistically significant different

skill levels between leaders and non-leaders for all skill groupings (Table 2). These results indicate that parents of 4-H members who serve as volunteer leaders rated their skills to work with youth significantly higher than did non-leaders.

Table 2

*Comparison of Leader and Non-leader Skills Using Critical Indicators of Quality Youth Development*

Indicators	Leaders		Non-leaders		Z
	N	Mean Rank	N	Mean Rank	
Physical and Psychological Safety	305	265	203	239	1.93**
Appropriate Structure	312	288	199	205	6.37*
Supportive Relationships	304	270	212	242	2.09**
Opportunities to Belong	319	280	211	243	2.86*
Positive Social Norms	321	281	213	247	2.53*
Opportunities for Skill Building	313	273	200	232	3.15*
Support for Efficacy and Mattering	319	281	204	233	3.66*

\*  $p < .01$

\*\*  $p < .05$

### Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study indicate that parents who are volunteer 4-H leaders tend to rate their skills to promote positive youth development significantly higher than parents who are not 4-H leaders. Further, if non-leader skill scores provide a baseline for where parents begin their involvement in the 4-H program, areas to concentrate leader education efforts emerge.

The research results presented here imply that parents receive explicit benefits in exchange for the time and effort volunteered to 4-H youth and programs. These include statistically significant improvements in skills to promote positive youth development, as compared to parents who do not volunteer. This information may help Extension 4-H professionals in the process of forming new 4-H organizations to market, attract and recruit parents to volunteer by outlining such benefits that include acquiring the skills needed to work effectively with 4-H youth. The youth development skills parents learn as a volunteer also may help enhance their own parenting and family life skills.

Although youth vary in their length and level of involvement in 4-H, and age restrictions vary internationally, parents that volunteer and learn important youth development skills can provide long-term

support for positive behavioral changes in youth long after that youth has left a program. Thus, the effects of 4-H youth participation on parents also are important to sustain positive effects on 4-H youth. Finally, Extension 4-H professionals may take greater care in screening leader recruits, as the success of 4-H also depends upon the initial leadership potential of parents recruited in addition to any formal and non-formal education received.

Recommendations for future research include assessing how the results presented here might compare with results in other countries. Although the theoretical framework adopted for this study represents the current standard for quality youth development work in the U.S., little is known about how this framework applies to youth audiences from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This remains an important opportunity for further research. As 4-H organizations continue to develop internationally, efforts should begin to create multi-disciplinary multi-cultural research teams to investigate program impacts on a global scale. The results of this research can help raise awareness and appreciation for diversity within the international 4-H organization and help to build a global community of Extension 4-H professionals, volunteer leaders and youth members. A global 4-H community can provide valuable

insight into future program directions, such as curricula development beyond agricultural and consumer sciences in agrarian based countries, to include programs designed specifically for youth facing a complex set of social issues in a rapidly changing world. Issues might include, for example, community development projects that hold positive youth development as its primary objective, natural disaster response strategies that seek to protect and support youth survivors, children orphaned by the A.I.D.S epidemic or wars. Orphans involved in a youth development organization would have an opportunity to learn important skills from volunteers. Parents who lost their own children might have an opportunity to help other children as a volunteer.

To summarize, regardless of where a 4-H program exists in the world, focused education to introduce and strengthen skills featured in this study can help to shape parent recruits into skilled leaders needed for effective 4-H programming. The resulting outcomes are youth, guided by adults, who are “thriving young people showing exemplary positive development in the present and become generative adults who make positive contributions to self, others, and civil society” (Lerner, 2004, p. 4). Lerner’s vision of “thriving young people” has a long tradition in 4-H as exemplified in the 4-H motto “to make the best better” for “my club, my community, my country, and my world.”

Future research, however, may attempt to isolate the value of a particular skill or set of skills over another for training and evaluation purposes. In addition, it will be important to assess if skills vary based on age, ethnicity and/or cultural background, or income level of volunteer leaders. Present results, however, reveal that 4-H leaders possess higher skill levels to work with youth than do non-leaders and provide direction for future efforts to educate leaders to work with 4-H youth. An emphasis on specific skills groups such as those featured

in this study can help those involved in the recruitment, training, and retention of quality 4-H staff. For example, although leaders generally rated themselves higher when compared to parents, certain critical skills like teaching social and life skills, relating well to diverse youth, and managing conflict and teasing were the lowest ranked skills among leaders. Such results provide direction for orientation and in-service training of staff and volunteers. Even experienced volunteer leaders may participate in focused trainings to enhance the skills they have developed “on-the-job.”

Finally, 4-H in the U.S. has initiated a national commitment to internationalizing the 4-H program further. In 1998, the U.S. National 4-H Youth Development Global Education Design Team defined future global education within the U.S. 4-H organization and outlined goals to provide 4-H youth the tools to discover a relationship to the world. Their vision is that all 4-H participants will have an opportunity to experience meaningful global learning. Their value statement is as follows: “One World; One People; One Environment; One Future; One Concern for Safety and Justice; Global Education...Our Hope” (National 4-H Headquarters, 1998). With full participation and continued collaborative research, the future holds great promise for effective 4-H programming on a global scale.

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Volume 12, Number 2. 4-H Volunteer Leader Skills and Implications for Global 4-H Program Development. Loretta Singletary, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Extension Educator University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Reno P.O. Box 811 Yerington, NV 89447 E-mail: singletaryl@unce.unr.edu. Marilyn Smith, M.S., Professor and Youth Development Specialist University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Reno 701 Walnut Street Elko, Nevada 89801 E-mail: smithm@unce.unr.edu. Contemporary 4-H programs also convene youth from diverse ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds through international youth exchange programs. A unique feature of 4-H worldwide is its reliance upon adult volunteer leaders who teach and guide youth. Global Educational opportunities allow youth to experience life outside of their community or share their culture with other students. Contact your county extension office for more information (link). 4-H Back to Adventure: Youth Leaders in a Global World is designed for adult and teen volunteers, parents and professionals and others to use in working with young people aged 9 to 19 to develop the knowledge and skills they need to become youth leaders in an interconnected, global environment. (134 pages) Intended user: adult and teen volunteers, professionals. Source: Contact State 4-H Office " Rachel Noble. Michigan State University 4-H Youth Development 4H1643 FREE. WeConnect: A Global Youth Citizenship Curriculum. Volunteers come into the 4-H program hoping to support youth and make a difference. In the process, they gain skills in teaching, leadership and communication. These skills transfer to other environments in which volunteers work and live. 92% built new relationships with youth. 4-H Youth Development benefits from volunteers. Volunteers give their time, talents and energy to the 4-H program. On average, volunteers give nine hours per month, an annual contribution worth \$2,600\*. This really helps them develop skills for interacting with people who are different from themselves. When these children go out into the community they have the skills to get involved in school, sports, community activities etc. They become community leaders because of 4-H. 4-H Youth Development Program. 4-H Volunteer Leaders. Children, Youth and Families at Risk Program. Expanded Food & Nutrition Education Program. Batik Class. 4-H Volunteer Leaders. Our volunteers and parents. The strength of 4-H comes from the power that volunteers and parents have to positively impact the lives of young people. 4-H volunteer leaders and parents partner to assist and support youth as they gain knowledge, master new skills, and strive to reach their fullest potential and become caring, contributing, compassionate young leaders in their communities. A parent's role in 4-H.