



Keeping Youth In 4-H: Why Do Some Leave?

Background

4-H clubs become stronger as members gain new knowledge and confidence from their previous experiences. Returning 4-H members continue to learn new things, have fun and are in a better position to contribute their ideas and skills to help others in the club. When youth drop out of our 4-H clubs, they miss new experiences and the club misses their potential contributions.

What to do

Activity: Top 10 Reasons Why Members Leave 4-H

(Hand out paper and pencil if people need them.) Let's pretend this is late night TV. We will create our own Top 10 list . . . Top 10 reasons why youth drop out of 4-H. Take a minute to write down your own reasons. As a table group, take a few minutes to write down your top ten reasons. We will compare your group's list with others.

Why Do Members Leave?

Let's compare our top choices with those of youth in an Indiana study that included 184 youth from 10 counties. Half of the youth were between the ages of 10-13 and the other half were between 14-18 (Ritchie and Resler, 1993). (Note: You could do this TV emcee style and unveil #3 first, then #2, and finally, with a drum roll, #1.)

Youth said they were:

1. Displeased with their 4-H club (boring meetings, not enough project help)
2. Too busy with sports
3. Too busy with a job

Parents said their child was:

1. Not happy with the club
2. Too busy with sports
3. Dissatisfied with projects

Note: Only eight of the drop-out children's parents helped with a club activity and most only gave their children a little help with their projects.

Other studies have found:

- New families leaving 4-H said: they lacked understanding of the 4-H program, its goals, activities, events and time commitment; never felt welcome or part of the group; and project groups didn't meet often enough to satisfy children. Some in this study moved or had conflicting time commitments as reasons for not re-enrolling (Astroth, 1985).
- Members who don't complete projects are more likely to drop out (Woloshuk, Brown, Wagaman, 1999).
- Primary reasons youth participants left 4-H: became involved with other activities, lost interest in 4-H, did not have fun, did not learn anything new and did not feel welcomed at

club or project meetings and friends were not in 4-H (Wisconsin 4-H Retention Study, 2011-2012).

Four Essential Elements of the 4-H Experience

The research on member retention can help all of us improve the experiences we are currently providing. The research shows us that some of the reasons youth and their families leave 4-H are beyond our control, such as schedule conflicts and moving away. But we have control of things related to the quality of the 4-H experience . . . things that the club leadership team of officers, youth leaders, project leaders and general/organizational leaders can do. This is not the responsibility of one or two people, but everyone on the team.

Let's look at the four essential elements that should be part of the 4-H experience in the handout, "Essential Elements of 4-H." These elements are based on research and were identified by the National 4-H Impact Design Team.

Using the Essential Elements to Strengthen Clubs

The assessment tool, "Using Essential Elements Feedback Form," is built around the four Essential Elements and will help 4-H clubs determine strengths and areas to improve in meeting the needs of members. Have everyone on the club leadership team or all youth leaders, parents and adult volunteers complete the form. Acknowledge the club's strengths and build on them. Take a close look at the areas most often identified as needing improvement. For example, remember the reasons why youth did not re-enroll. Use the survey results to plan actions to improve the member experience at club meetings and their project work.

Closing

This discussion is a starting point. 4-H Youth Development staff members are available to meet with club leadership teams to discuss the feedback form and provide ideas to help strengthen a group.

TALK IT OVER

Reflect:

- What are the most common reasons that youth do not rejoin 4-H?
- What is the most important thing that clubs should do to keep youth interested?

Apply:

- What tips would you give to add to the 4 Essential Elements to your club meeting?
- How might your 4-H club use the feedback form?

Adapted by Diane Mack, 4-H Youth Development Specialist from "Keeping Youth in 4-H: Why do some Leave," Linda Kustka, Professor Emeritus, Department of Youth Development, UW-Extension. Based on information from the following sources: "The Challenge of Retaining 4-H Members" by Kirk A. Astroth; "Why Youth Drop Out of 4-H" by Robert M. Ritchie and Kenda M. Resler; and "4-H Projects: Is Completion Important?" by Jean M. Woloshuk, Guendoline Brown and Gena D. Wagaman. Additional information from Wisconsin 4-H Retention Study Survey Results, Sara Donnerbauer, Betsy Olson and Marie Witzel.

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