

# Using an Experiential Model in 4-H<sup>1</sup>

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4-H Youth Development relies heavily upon the five steps of the experiential learning model to teach life skills. The sequential steps of the model help youth identify what they have learned from a 4-H experience or activity and to apply that learning to other experiences or situations. This model requires that the “teacher/leader” be very clear about the skill or concept targeted and that the experience and the processing questions are designed to support that learner goal. The experiential learning process engages the learners in all phases of the activity, resulting in the ability to generalize this learning to new situations.

## Exploring the Experiential Learning Model

4-H has adopted a process that allows youth to learn through a carefully planned “doing” experience that is followed by leader led discussion using purposeful questions. The experiential learning model by Kolb (1984) and modified by 4-H includes five specific steps:

1. Participant(s) **experience** the activity—perform or do it.
2. Participant(s) **share** the experience by describing what happened.
3. Participant(s) **process** the experience to determine what was most important and identify common themes.
4. Participant(s) **generalize** from the experience and relate it to their daily lives.

5. Participant(s) **apply** what they learned to a new situation.

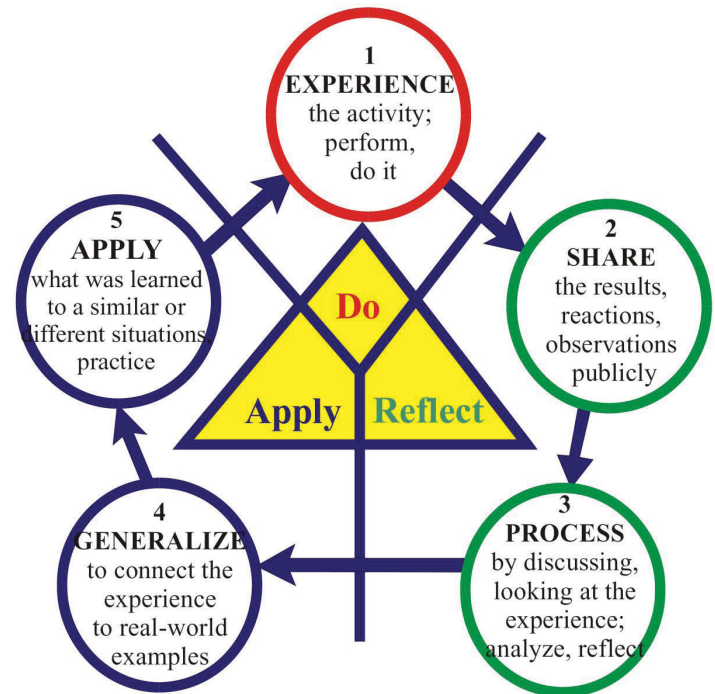


Figure 1.

When this model is used, youth both experience and process the activity. They learn from thoughts and ideas about the experience. Each step contributes to their learning.

Providing an experience alone does not create experiential learning. Experiences lead to learning if the participant understands what happened, sees patterns of observations, generalizes from those observations and understands how to use the generalization again in a new situation.

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Advantages for adult/youth helpers (volunteers) in using the experiential learning process in group settings include:

- being able to assess youth's knowledge of or experiences with a subject and building upon it
- serving as a coach using a variety of methods to involve youth in the experience
- learning together with youth in a cooperative way

Benefits for youth participating in the experiential learning process, no matter what their individual learning style, include:

- learning from each other by sharing knowledge and skills
- working together, sharing information and evaluating themselves and others
- taking responsibility for their own learning
- relating experiences to their own lives

## Reviewing the Five Steps of the Experiential Learning Model Experience

Note the model begins with an experience. Action! This immediately focuses the attention on the learner rather than the teacher. The leader should provide guidance throughout the experience, but not be directive—the goal is for the youth to “experience” the activity in order to develop the targeted life skills. When the learner is encouraged to learn by doing, opportunities are presented for a wide variety of life skills to be practiced depending on the method used to engage the youth in the experience.

Many types of activities can be used to provide a learning experience. The experience chosen will depend on the life skills being targeted and the way the learners can become involved with the content. If the intent is to have youth practice decision-making, then the experience needs to provide opportunities to practice decision-making as the subject matter is explored. Some popular activities used in 4-H to promote life skill development are:

Play a game	Team-work, risk taking
Experiments	decision-making, problem solving
Planning activities	team work, planning, leadership
Giving presentations	communicating
Interviewing others	communications, relating to others
Solving a problem	decision-making, problem solving
Making models & products	problem solving, leadership, accessing resources

## Method: Life Skill

**Processing the Experience**—Debriefing the experience is what moves an experience from an activity to a learning experience. The primary purpose of processing the experience is to allow participants the opportunity to integrate their learning and provide a sense of closure or completeness to their experience.

The leader can assist in this process by:

Setting aside enough time to reflect on the experience(s).

- Asking the right questions.
- Listening to the youth carefully.
- Planning appropriate opportunities to help youth reflect on their experiences.
- Supporting each youth's unique learning.

The questions asked to walk youth through the experiential process are critical. Leaders need to prepare the questions they will use to process the experience ahead of time. The format is critical to the learning process.

**Share**—Sharing is accomplished by asking the group or individuals to reflect upon what they did. Ask questions that help them think about:

- *What they did.*
- *What they saw; felt; heard; smelled, tasted; etc.*
- *What part of the experience was the most difficult and what was the easiest for them.*

This step should generate information leading to the process step.

**Process**—In this step, the questions and discussion focus on the process of the experience or activity. Participants are asked to think about how the experience was conducted or how the activity was performed. Questions should lead youth to think about:

- *What procedures or steps they used in doing the activity.*
- *What problems or issues came up as they did the activity.*
- *How they dealt with these problems.*
- *Why the life skill they practiced is important.*

**Generalize**—In this step, the discussion becomes more personal and focuses on what the experience meant to the participant and what was learned from it. The subject matter alone could remain the focus of the discussion in

all five steps of the model. However, because 4-H focuses on helping youth develop important life skills, a major part of the generalized discussion is shifted to the life skill the youth practiced while working with the subject matter. For example, if the method employed required the youth to work in teams to complete the activity, then questions about teamwork would be appropriate. If the methodology requires youth to communicate then communication skills are discussed. Questions should lead youth to determine:

- *What they learned about (the activity objective) from the experience.*
- *How this learning relates to other things they have been learning.*
- *What similar experiences they have had (with this life skill or subject matter).*

**Apply**—This final step in the Experiential Learning model directs youth to apply what they learned to their lives. They are asked to think about how the learning from this experience could be used at another time or under other conditions. They are led to think about how what they have learned might change the way they approach a similar task. Application of learning can be processed for both the life skill practiced as well as the subject matter skill. Questions are structured to address:

- *How what they learned relates to other parts of their lives.*
- *How they can use what they learned.*
- *How they can apply what they learned to future situations.*

As adults facilitate the processing of the experience they should be very aware of the stage or step of the experiential model in which the group is working and be prepared to move the group to the next step when they are ready.

Asking the right questions is in itself a skill to be learned. Sometimes a short activity in which everyone answers the same question or simply finishes a sentence will get everyone focused.

Finishing a statement like “I learned that...” or “I felt...” will stimulate discussion. For large groups, form pairs or triads to discuss something and to report the highlights of that discussion with the larger group. This engages more youth. Remember to move with the participants. Adjust the questions based upon the responses they give. Continue to help them build on their experiences.

The most important outcome of an Experiential Learning process is that participants show they have gained new knowledge and practiced the life skill and project skill

targeted. The questions discussed in the processing and application steps of the experiential model will often provide excellent feedback to both youth and leaders. Even better evaluation information can be gathered by having the group apply what they have learned to another situation. If adults use experiential learning successfully some of the most important results will happen as youth apply new skills in their everyday lives.

## Using the Experiential Learning Model with Project Meetings

When youth enroll in a project, they will attend project meetings and use 4-H curriculum materials to study a specific subject. The Project Meeting is the heart of a member's project involvement, so it's important that the time is well planned and involves all the youth. Participants decide what to include and when, with the assistance of the 4-H club volunteers. Projects are used as a way for youth to practice and learn life skills. 4-H project curricula include manuals for the members, and leaders' or helpers' guides for the adults. All of the curricula include step-by-step instructions on using the material, general information on the subjects, procedures for conducting each activity, supplies needed for each activity, questions to use to process each experience, and suggestions for related activities. Generally, the 4-H curriculum is self-explanatory and easy to read. Developmental outcomes and learning indicators are included, as well the life skill development that is being targeted. It is important to review the curriculum and be prepared with all necessary supplies prior to the club/project group meetings.