

The Value of 4-H to Youth in Florida and Beyond¹

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Introduction

Knowing the value of 4-H as stakeholders perceive it is important to maximize the strengths of the 4-H youth development program and to promote its value to the public and funding agencies. Various studies have found how 4-H benefits its participants, typically through studying the youth participants or alumni of the 4-H program.

For example, Astroth and Haynes (2002) found that 4-H participants are “more likely to develop self-confidence, social competence, and practical skills; to take on community leadership roles; and to feel more accepted and listened to by adults.” Seever et al. (2011) reviewed studies that focused on the impact of 4-H youth programs in six western U.S. states and found “that youth involved in 4-H programs overall had higher positive response values than youth not in 4-H in almost every category” (p. 7).

In a study of sixth through 12th graders who were in 4-H clubs in Florida, DeCubellis and Barrick (2021) found that most of the students who completed the survey had a high sense of belonging at their 4-H clubs. Mantooth and Fritz (2006) identified the benefit of service-learning conducted through 4-H. Duncan et al. (2016) found “94% of the participants (senior high students) agreed that 4-H helped them to shape their belief towards bullying; 84% either agreed or strongly agreed that 4-H has helped them be more confident around strangers; and 93% indicated that 4-H helped them to gain confidence in situations so they could speak up for themselves.” Using the perceptions

of parents of 4-H participants, Radhakrishna (2006) conducted descriptive-correlational research to determine the educational value of 4-H competitive events.

Flores-Lagunes and Timko (2015) found “the extent of 4-H participation at the district-grade-year level is positively and significantly related to several measures of performance” on the “third- through tenth grade mathematics and reading subtests” of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). In a survey of college-attending 4-H alumni, Ratkos and Knollenberg (2015) found that “4-H participation helps young people prepare for and succeed in college” with “4-H alumni rated significantly higher than the comparison group on six life skills constructs.” In addition, a 2023 study of California 4-H young adult alumni by Marshall-Wheeler et al. using Gambone et al.’s (2002) framework, which identified three long-term outcomes for early adulthood (economic stability, health and well-being, and community involvement), discovered “that 4-H alumni report more positive long-term outcomes” than a U.S. general population comparison sample.

Lerner et al.’s (2024) longitudinal 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development conducted from 2002 to 2012 suggests

that 4-H was the exemplar of a youth program that promoted PYD through: 1. Positive and sustained relationships between a young person and an adult; 2. Life-skill building activities; and 3. Opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of valued activities in family, school, or community settings (the “Big

1. This document is 4H450, one of a series of the Florida 4-H Youth Development Program, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date June 2025. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication. © 2025 UF/IFAS. This publication is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

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Three”). When PYD was promoted by youth development programs, youth would contribute positively to their communities and, by the end of the high-school years, become active and engaged citizens. (p. 2)

However, Arnold et al. (2018) stated a “difficulty with the 5C model, also noted by Heck and Subramanian (2009), is that the measurement of model elements is complex and the required statistical analysis is complicated and advanced, which limits the utility of the measures that determined the model’s structure for practical program evaluation based on the model.” Thus, other means to ascertain the benefits of 4-H participation, such as the Florida-centered survey research presented in this publication, remain beneficial.

The Value of 4-H According to Parents of 4-H Club Members in Florida

Parents are key stakeholders in the 4-H program since they approve of their children being members and they are taxpayers and voters. Therefore, a study on the responses from parents of 4-H club members in Florida aimed to determine what value 4-H brings to youth members of 4-H clubs, based on the perceptions of their parents.

Methods

This was descriptive survey research involving a randomly selected oversample of 3,000 parents of 4-H club members in Florida and following procedures of mixed-methods survey research (Dillman et al., 2014), conducted from July 2020 through June 2021. The study was sponsored by the UF/IFAS Extension Florida 4-H Youth Development Program, designed by an Extension faculty member, and administered by the Florida Survey Research Center. It received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (exempt) at the University of Florida (IRB202000783). The study used mixed methods of mailed and online questionnaires, with an online version offered in Spanish and English. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher, reviewed by a panel of experts, and field tested by adults similar to the respondents. It largely replicated a similar study conducted by the principal investigator at the county level in another state using a telephone survey (Diem, 1992).

The sample for this study was a list of all parents who have a child or children who are current or former members of a 4-H club in Florida, derived from the *4-H Online* enrollment system. Announcements were made to Extension/4-H staff in advance and multiple follow-ups were mailed to

study subjects. Ultimately, the sample of surveys usable for analysis in this study is 377 completed surveys. Based on the number of households in the population (9,700), a sample of 377 completions yielded a margin of error of +/- 4.95% at a 95% confidence level.

Key Findings

Survey findings revealed the following about the value of 4-H to youth in Florida:

HOW 4-H HAS BEEN VALUABLE

Parents of 4-H club members reported that 4-H has been valuable or very valuable in helping their children

- learn new knowledge or skills (97%)
- develop an interest in learning (90%)
- get along with other people (90%)
- develop self-confidence (89%)
- develop decision-making skills (86%)
- develop an interest in helping others or the community (86%)
- speak in front of a group (85%)
- develop a career interest (70%)

Overall, 96% of 4-H parents believe 4-H has been valuable or very valuable for their children.

WHY 4-H IS VALUABLE

The top reasons why parents think 4-H is valuable are the following:

- It offers a wide variety of projects and activities (81%).
- 4-H offers quality programs (57%).
- 4-H makes learning fun (50%).
- Activities are inexpensive (46%).
- 4-H offers worthwhile activities (45%).
- Both boys and girls can be members (42%).

Parents also believed that 4-H is appropriately structured, changes to stay relevant, and offers enough awards and recognition.

Note: Respondents were able to rate multiple options.

OTHER BELIEFS OF 4-H PARENTS

Parents agree or strongly agree with additional statements that they

- are proud to tell others their family participates in 4-H (97%).
- would recommend 4-H to other families (96%).
- believe 4-H should actively recruit kids from all backgrounds across the county (87%).
- believe 4-H is valuable in complementing formal, in-school education (84%).
- believe 4-H offers unique programs compared to other youth organizations (88%).
 - Furthermore, 83% of 4-H club members have been involved in other youth organizations besides 4-H, and 90% of those parents believe 4-H is just as valuable or more valuable than other such organizations.

PROBLEMS FACED BY 4-H

The top problems faced by 4-H were the following:

- The public thinks 4-H is only for kids who live on farms (63%);
- Not enough people know about 4-H (54%); and
- Public funding for 4-H is in jeopardy (38%).

Note: Respondents were able to choose multiple options.

Conclusions, Implications, and Questions for Further Study

Overall, parents of 4-H club members reported that 4-H has been valuable in helping their children in various ways and that 4-H offers unique programs compared to other youth organizations. Of the cases where 4-H club members have been involved in other youth organizations besides 4-H, a large majority of their parents believe 4-H is just as valuable or more valuable than other such organizations.

However, this representative statewide sample of parents of current 4-H club members realize that not enough people know about 4-H and that the public often thinks 4-H is only for kids who live on farms. The finding shows that even strong supporters of 4-H understand that not everyone else feels the same way about 4-H because they simply do not know enough about it to realize its value. This validates the need to share 4-H program development with broader audiences.

Here are some questions to consider regarding the implications of the findings of this study and how they might influence Extension/4-H programming:

- Parents often understand the value of 4-H to their own children who have participated in 4-H. How can this be communicated to families not currently participating in 4-H?
- What implications are there regarding the value of 4-H that may influence broadening participation in 4-H?
- In what ways should the 4-H program be changed to attract currently underrepresented audiences?
- What communication/marketing strategies can be employed to promote the value of 4-H to decision-makers, funding agencies, and other stakeholders at state and local levels?

Acknowledgments

Thank you...

- Tracy Johns, research associate scientist, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, and (former) research director, Florida Survey Research Center
- Michael Scicchitano, (former) associate professor, Department of Political Science, and director and (former) staff, Florida Survey Research Center
- Michael Gutter, (former) state 4-H program leader, and Stacy Ellison, state 4-H program leader, for reviewing the questionnaire and approving funding for the study
- Ben Knowles, (former) state 4-H information and volunteer management coordinator, for assisting with *4-H Online* lists
- County Extension/4-H faculty for promoting/supporting the study
- Parents of 4-H club members in Florida who took the time to respond to the survey

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