

Letters to New Leaders: Letter 1

What is 4-H?

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Dear Leader:

So you've volunteered and have been selected to be a new 4-H leader! Congratulations! You're starting an interesting, challenging and rewarding experience. Because we know you have many questions about this new venture, we believe you'll find the information in this and subsequent letters helpful.

This is the first in a series of six letters you will receive in the next few months. At the end of each letter is a section titled, "How can I use the information in this letter?" This section gives you the chance to think about the information in each letter and how you might use the information effectively in your club.

What is 4-H?

4-H is the youth audience of the Cooperative Extension System in the United States. Young people between the ages of 8 and 18 participate in individual and group learning experiences that help them learn skills for living. Five- to 7-year-olds learn life skills through Clover Kids group activities.

In Missouri, 4-H is part of University of Missouri Extension. The state 4-H office is located on the Columbia campus of the University of Missouri.

4-H leaders are considered volunteer staff members at the University of Missouri. At the local level, each county has an MU Extension center that administers the 4-H program. At the national level, 4-H is under



the leadership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The most widely recognized symbol of 4-H is the 4-H clover. This emblem is a green four-leaf clover with a white or gold "H" in each leaf, representing Head, Heart, Hands and Health.

The 4-H name and emblem may be used by local chartered 4-H clubs and other officially affiliated 4-H organizations. The use of the 4-H name and emblem should be consistent with the educational purposes, character-building objectives and dignity of the 4-H program. It cannot be used to endorse commercial firms, products or services. If there are questions about the appropriate use of the 4-H emblem, contact your local MU Extension center.

How does the 4-H program work?

4-H connects young people with caring adults. Adult interaction with youth is guided by the Essential

Elements of 4-H. These elements are central to helping young people become competent and contributing adults. Programs focused on fostering these elements will be the most successful in helping youth develop to their fullest potential.

Belonging — Youth need to know they are cared about and accepted by others. They also need to experience a sense of physical and emotional safety and to feel a sense of connection to others in the group.

Interdependence — Youth need to know they are able to influence people and events through decision-making and action. Interdependence refers to an adolescent's growing ability to think, feel, make decisions and act on his or her own.

Generosity — Young people need to feel their lives have meaning and purpose. They need opportunities to connect to their communities and learn how to give back.

Mastery — In order to develop self-confidence and a sense that they matter, young people need to feel that they are capable. Mastery includes the development of skills, knowledge and attributes, followed by the competent demonstration of these skills and knowledge.

It is said, "It is better to build a child than to mend an adult." This, in a nutshell, is the main objective of the 4-H program. 4-H is a learn-by-doing program. This experiential learning occurs when young people participate in an activity, look back to reflect on the activity, draw

conclusions or observations from the experience and relate the experience to other or future experiences in their lives. Through the experiential learning process, young people develop basic, transferable skills that are useful in real life experiences today and in the future.

Of primary importance in this learn-by-doing approach is the 4-H project. The project is a set of activities centered around a specific subject. (See MU Extension publication Y603, *4-H Clover*, for a list of projects.) Each member or group selects one or more projects according to interest and ability. Each project requires the member or group to establish goals, work toward those goals and evaluate the progress made.

What's more important — the 4-H project or the 4-H boy and girl?

The 4-H members, of course! 4-H is a people program. It's objective is to assist in the development of boys and girls. Projects are tools for teaching young people by stimulating their interest. A commonly stated example of the 4-H philosophy is, "A blue ribbon 4-H'er with a red ribbon project is better than a red ribbon 4-H'er with a blue ribbon project."

What is the 4-H leader's job?

- To help youth develop skills from their experiences in club groups, leadership activities and projects. Young people remember better when they actually experience something and have an opportunity for hands-on learning. 4-H encourages skills that will be useful to them now and in the future. 4-H helps each member develop good habits, experiment with new and challenging ideas,

How can I use the information in this letter?

1. New ideas to use in our club: _____

2. Other people who could help us and how they might help: _____

3. Questions to ask MU Extension staff and other leaders: _____

and practice problem-solving skills.

- To teach 4-H members *how* to think, not *what* to think. 4-H helps develop creative thinking in young people by giving them a chance to make decisions on their own. They'll learn by making their own choices.
- To recognize and encourage 4-H members so they feel noticed and important. The most significant forms of recognition that can be given to members are praise, attention or compliments letting them know they are important and what they have done is worthwhile. For some, 4-H may be the only place they get this support.

This is what 4-H is all about — the personal development of boys and girls.

Welcome to the world of 4-H!

Missouri 4-H recognizes the importance of good character in everything that is done. 4-H staff and volunteers as well as 4-H members and their families know

that a person of character

- is a good person — someone to look up to and admire,
- knows the difference between right and wrong and always tries to do what is right,
- sets a good example,
- makes the world a better place, and
- lives according to the **Six Pillars of Character** — Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring and Citizenship.

Another helpful MU Extension publication is LG783, *Learn by Doing* (<http://4h.missouri.edu/resources/materials/category.htm#project>).

Adapted from:

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