

LETTERS TO LEADERS

Letter 1

What is 4-H?

How does the 4-H program work? What is the 4-H volunteer leader's job?

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 lots of questions about this new venture, we believe you'll find the following information helpful.

This is the first of several letters you will receive in the next few months along with some supporting materials. We suggest you keep them all together in a notebook for easy reference. When you have all the letters and the reference materials, you will have a useful 4-H leader's handbook.

What is 4-H?

4-H is a dynamic nonformal education program primarily for youth between the ages of 9 and 19. While 4-H is cocurricular (which means clubs can meet during the school day), it is also an out-of-school program.

In Louisiana, 4-H programs are administered through the Louisiana State University AgCenter and Southern University. On the national level, 4-H is administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The program receives funding through federal, state and local tax dollars. We have a National 4-H Council (in Chevy Chase, Maryland), the Louisiana 4-H Foundation and parish 4-H foundations to which people can make tax-deductible contributions. Volunteers who serve as 4-H leaders are considered lay faculty members of the LSU AgCenter and Southern University. Through the parish extension office, these volunteers have access to research and resulting curriculum developed to have the greatest positive impact on youth.

How does the 4-H program work?

It's often said, "It is better to develop a child than to mend an adult." This, in a nutshell, is the main objective of the 4-H program.

In 4-H, volunteer leaders encourage youth to gain knowledge and learn through their project work and club activities. Members learn life skills like planning, decision making and resource management through their project work. Club meetings are learning laboratories where members develop social skills. Through clubs, members learn how to communicate and work with others, practice their leadership skills, and develop strong character. Through service-learning and community service activities, members learn how to be responsible citizens who contribute to their communities. Research tells us that youth involved in volunteer activities remain involved as adults.

Members improve their communication skills through club interaction, 4-H record-keeping and presentations. They also develop positive attitudes about themselves and others, learn basic health and safety practices and acquire educational and vocational experiences. Each year members are challenged to set higher goals to become more knowledgeable about their projects and assume greater leadership responsibility within the club and the parish 4-H program. All of this does not happen at once, but develops gradually as members continue their involvement in 4-H with the guidance of their volunteer leader.

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What’s more important — the 4-H project or the youth?

The 4-H member, of course! 4-H is a people program. Its objective is to develop boys and girls. Projects are tools for teaching youth by stimulating their interests. Our ultimate goal is for 4-H’ers to know more and be able to do more at the end of the year. A commonly stated example of the 4-H philosophy is, “A blue ribbon 4-H’er with a red ribbon project is more desirable than a red ribbon 4-H’er with a blue ribbon project.”

The philosophy of positive youth development

The founding fathers (and mothers) showed tremendous wisdom and vision when they introduced the nationwide extension service and 4-H youth program. They created a nonformal education program that targeted rural youth, especially those in the farming communities.

They taught new information and practices to youth, who, in turn, shared their new knowledge with their families. Reaching families by teaching youth saved lives as people applied new food preservation practices. Agricultural production improved as farmers adopted new practices after observing the success of their children’s demonstrations.

Individuals like Seaman Knapp and Ralph Tyler went beyond expanding the knowledge of young people. They envisioned the purpose of 4-H as preparing youth to become responsible, contributing adults. Thus they emphasized development of life skills, such as personal development, communicating and working with others, problem-solving and decision making, and resource management. Emphasis was also placed on the development of citizenship and leadership skills. The club became a living laboratory for members to practice their life skills.

Through its over 100 years of existence, the programming approach used by 4-H in rural areas proved equally effective for youth development in the suburbs and cities. What the founders of 4-H realized, at least intuitively, was that project learning could be expanded beyond knowledge gain to include personal development.

The founders did not really have a name for it back then, but today we call it positive youth development. In short, positive youth development prepares young people to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful as adults.

What is the 4-H volunteer leader’s job?

Your responsibility is to help 4-H members learn specific project skills. 4-H members have fun with projects while “learning by doing.” Most people remember more if they actually experience something and have an opportunity for some “hands-on learning.”

Learning takes place within the learner. It is not something that is done to the learner. We encourage skills that will be useful to the young person now and in the future. We help each member develop good habits, experiment with new ideas and practice problem-solving skills. By doing this, we help them become self-directed, productive and contributing, compassionate members of society.

A major goal is to teach 4-H members how to think, not what to think. We help develop creative thinking in young people by giving them a chance to make decisions on their own. They’ll learn from their own choices. Another goal is to recognize and encourage each 4-H member so he or she feels noticed and important. The most significant recognition that can be given to members is praise and attention. Let them know they are important and what they have done is worthwhile.



WHAT IS 4-H?

How I plan to use the information in this letter:

New activities to incorporate into our club program:

Other people who could help us and how they might help:

Questions to ask LSU AgCenter extension staff and other leaders:



Visit our website: www.LSUAgCenter.com/4H

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PUB2865-A (Online Only) 10/20 Rev.
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