



4-H: An Exclusively Inclusive Program

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“To Make the Best Better” is the national motto of the 4-H program. Youth are this nation’s “best” resource. The 4-H program’s mission is to help youth develop important life skills, and make them even “better.” The University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has identified these life skills:

1. Fostering positive self-concept,
2. Developing an inquiring mind,
3. Learning decision making and responsibility for choices,
4. Relating to self and others,
5. Acquiring a concern for community, both locally and globally.¹

The development of these life skills have been shown to give youth the tools they need to make responsible decisions, have a better understanding of their values, and better able to communicate and get along with others.²

The four Hs in the 4-H emblem, which is a four-leaf clover, stand for head, heart, hands, and health. 4-H strives to help develop each of these components in its members. Character assets that 4-H also strives to instill in its members:

1. Service to others,
2. Caring,
3. Equality and justice,
4. Integrity,
5. Honesty,
6. Responsibility,
7. Restraint.³

The more of these assets that youth learn, the more likely they are to grow up being competent and successful.⁴ In Wyoming, as well as other rural states, 4-H is an important part in the lives of many of its youth. Despite the scenic beauty, the vast spaces and sparse population in rural areas can lead to a feeling of isolation. Through 4-H, members and their families can come together to work, play, and socialize. Friendship networks are built. People make connections with one another.



Children and Disabilities:

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act defines someone with a disability as one having a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, including seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, dressing, feeding, working, learning, and recreating.⁵ Children with disabilities living in rural areas may feel even more isolated than those in the same location without disability. Because of the sparse population, a child with a particular disability may have had little or no exposure to another person with his or her same disability. If this child lived in a more densely populated state, he or she would have greater access to groups of people with the same disability. Family members would have access to support groups specifically for families of children with their child's particular disability. In rural areas, however, few people may have the same disability, and many miles may separate the few individuals who do. Families of children with disabilities tend to make friends with similar families.⁶ Studies have shown that there appears to be limited interaction between families of children with disabilities and families of children with no disabilities. Although they may be interested in participating in clubs and organizations, families may feel self-conscious about joining groups designed for children without disabilities.⁷

In the last few decades, the formal education system has improved the integration of children with disabilities into all aspects of the system including sports, other extracurricular activities, and inclusion in regular classrooms. However, children with disabilities may be still be placed into special education classrooms, or they may feel unwelcome to participate in extracurricular activities due to their disabilities. Family members may also feel isolated because they may be afraid to reach out to other families for assistance or friendship. They may feel overwhelmed by their child's disability and may worry about their child being unable to build friendships with or be accepted by their peers. Additionally, parents of youth with disabilities may be overprotective and may be leery of allowing their children to participate in activities in which the parents feel they have no control.⁸



4-H and Inclusiveness:

All youth need opportunities to be involved in activities unique to their own talents and interests. This is where 4-H can play an empowering role in the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families.⁹ Empowerment is defined as “the ability to get what one wants and needs.”¹⁰ Thus, 4-H can be an empowering pathway for youth with disabilities and their families to receive what they want and need: the opportunity to be involved, make friendships, and gain life skills. The life skills and characteristics previously listed as being important to the 4-H program can be embraced by members with and without disabilities. By providing access to 4-H programs to those with disabilities, 4-H becomes an inclusive organization. An inclusive organization as one that:

1. Recognizes that people are the same but also different,



2. Creates chances for others to experience freedom to participate,
3. Values each person and diversity,
4. Supports participation.¹¹

Through 4-H, members with disabilities are given opportunities to develop self-confidence and self-reliance. In addition, 4-H members without disabilities are benefited by an inclusive 4-H program because they begin to see that everyone, disabled or not, has strengths and weaknesses, has their own unique abilities, and learns to be less prejudiced towards those who are different. An inclusive 4-H program also encourages members without disabilities to assist those with disabilities in tasks that may be difficult for them. Likewise, members with disabilities are encouraged to use their unique skills to benefit the rest of the club. For example, a member with a hearing impairment could be encouraged to help teach basic sign language to the other club members and leaders. The member with the hearing impairment can take pride in teaching something in which he or she is an expert and give others a tool to communicate with him or her. Other



club members may benefit from learning the new skill of sign language so that they can more easily communicate with the member with the hearing impairment.

The Role of Leaders and Educators:

4-H leaders and educators reap benefits from an inclusive 4-H program because they have an opportunity to learn new skills and become more accepting and understanding of the people with whom they are working. Family members of those with disabilities also benefit by having an inclusive 4-H program. Giving children an opportunity to be part of an inclusive group, 4-H works to relieve some of the concerns parents have about their children's developmental needs.¹²

It is important to realize that while 4-H offers these benefits, families of children with disabilities may not seek out a 4-H program. Such families may feel overwhelmed by what they already must do to care for their children, and searching out programs such as 4-H may seem like a daunting task. It is important for educators and leaders to take the responsibility to approach families of children with disabilities and explain the benefits that 4-H has for all children, and why it can be particularly helpful for youth with disabilities and their families. Having club members involved in inviting youth with disabilities to join 4-H can also be very beneficial when done in a sincere and enthusiastic way. When contact is made with these families, it is important to elicit their opinions about what is needed in order to make 4-H inclusive for their children. During the visit, it would also be appropriate for leaders and educators to share the 4-H Basic Beliefs that are explained in greater detail below:

1. "The 4-H member is more important than the project." The development of character and life skills should be what is focused on first and foremost in a 4-H program. The final project is a secondary focus.
2. "Project work is one of the best devices for developing young people. To 'learn by doing' is fundamental to education and is characteristic of the 4-H program." Individual project work should be completed by the 4-H members. Leaders and



educators should serve as sources of information as members complete project work, but they should not do the work for the members. Project work can teach many life skills, but members must do the work themselves in order to actually obtain these skills.

3. “4-Hers should be their own best exhibit. This means in manners, attitudes, and courtesy, as well as appropriate dress and physical appearance.” Members will be expected to exhibit themselves to the best of their abilities. This may differ from person to person, and educators and leaders need to set examples as to how members should appropriately behave.
4. “Competition is a part of life. Competition in 4-H should be based on educational experience. Competition requires careful planning and safeguards.” Competition should focus on what a member has actually learned or gained from a project and less on how the final product turns out. For instance, imagine a member with cerebral palsy who puts forth great effort learning how to use power tools safely and in a manner that he or she can control so that they can participate in a woodworking project. This member builds a small wooden chest in which to store 4-H awards. At first glance it appears to be a red-ribbon exhibit. The corners are not even, and the lid does not shut tightly. However, after visiting with this member, one hears about all the time that the member spent learning about the tools needed to complete the project and what special modifications were required. Another member in the project exhibits a beautiful gun case, and one immediately sees this as the grand-prize-winning exhibit. After visiting with the member, one learns that he or she is not excited about the project, did not complete the project on their own, and learned very little. Which member gained more from the project?
5. “No 4-H award is worth sacrificing the reputation of a 4-H member or leader.” Parents should be added to this statement. Although adults may have the best intentions when they start out, if they complete the work for a 4-H member the member will gain little, except perhaps a feeling that adults



will do all of their work for them. So, the members might ask why should they do the work themselves? This situation can be especially detrimental for members with disabilities because people in their lives may always be trying to complete tasks for them to “protect” them from the things they believe the member cannot handle.

6. “A blue-ribbon 4-Her with a red-ribbon exhibit is more desirable than a red-ribbon 4-Her with a blue-ribbon exhibit.” If a member gives his or her best effort to complete a project and receives a red ribbon, the member will still gain much more than a child who receives a blue ribbon by putting out little effort or having someone else do their work.
7. “Every 4-H member needs to be noticed, feel important, achieve some degree of success, and be praised.” Every member should be recognized and applauded for participating in an event. It doesn’t matter what the praise is for; the vital thing is that the member should feel he or she is an important part of the 4-H program, is accepted by the group, and has something valuable to offer.



8. “It should be the goal of 4-H leaders and educators to teach 4-H members how to think, not what to think.” There are many ways to complete a project. Educators and leaders should provide opportunities for members to have input into what they want out of 4-H and how to achieve their goals. Members may come up with great ideas that others had never thought of.¹³

These basic beliefs are important for all participants in a 4-H program to be familiar with, whether or not they are disabled. For families of children with disabilities, these beliefs are a foundation for everything that can be gained by participating in 4-H.

Serving as Role Models:

A good deal of responsibility falls on 4-H educators and leaders to find appropriate ways to include individuals with disabilities in 4-H programs. Members will be watching to see how educators and leaders go about including an individual with a disability. Here are some tips that will help make 4-H a successful inclusive program:

1. Display a positive attitude. Do not look at inclusion as another hoop that must be jumped through. Look at it as a way to give youth of all abilities an opportunity to become their best. 4-H members count on leaders to provide them with examples of how to relate to a member with a disability, and the best way to teach this is with words of encouragement and a smile.

2. Everybody counts. When planning activities, take into account everyone that will be participating, and then design the activities so that each individual’s needs can be met. Make sure that each member feels he or she is an important and unique part of the group.
3. Adaptation is acceptable. Throw out the idea that “this is just how we have always done it.” Take on the new idea that “we can work together to find a way to include everyone.”¹⁴

One of Stephen Covey’s seven habits of highly effective people is to “Seek first to understand, then be understood.”¹⁵ The same principle applies to 4-H educators, and leaders. When a child with a disability becomes involved in 4-H, it is important to learn about the disability. It may be even more essential to understand how the disability affects this particular child, and what modifications may be needed in order for the child to best participate in 4-H. When doing this, it is important to include the child and his or her family and seek their opinions. Leaders should remember that even when they educate themselves about how the potential 4-H member is affected by the disability, they most likely do not have the insight that comes from living with the disability on a day to day basis.¹⁶ After leaders have sought to understand a child and his or her disability, they will be better able to successfully include them in 4-H.

Considering the 4-H Member:

Deciding on yearly 4-H projects can be an exciting time for a 4-H member. However, consideration needs to be given in certain areas when a member with a disability is selecting projects and mapping out 4-H activities for the year. Here are some important issues to consider:

1. First and foremost, keep in mind the member’s interests. For example, if a member with paraplegia is interested in learning about and working with animals, don’t attempt to push them into taking a project they are not interested in just because it appears more easily achieved. This member could easily participate in a veterinary science project, livestock judging, or small-animal project involving



rabbits or chickens. Other animal projects can be taken with some modifications. A member's family, for example, could purchase a wheelchair with wide wheels and motor for better mobility in a show arena. Large animals like market steers have been successfully exhibited by members in wheelchairs.¹⁷

Leaders should remember to think creatively when a 4-Her with a disability is interested in a project.

2. Consult others when determining any modifications that must be made for projects or activities. A state 4-H program coordinator or state youth specialists are great resources for what can and should be done both legally and in accordance with the 4-H program. Other people who could be included are the member, member's parent(s), leaders, county 4-H educators, any possible aides such as interpreters, other 4-H members, the case manager of the child's school individualized education program (IEP), and medical professionals.
3. Network, network, network. Contact other counties, the state 4-H office, or organizations that have a history of working with young people having disabilities to determine if they have advice for working with a particular member. Grant monies may be available to purchase equipment needed by a person with a disability to complete a project.
4. Consider having the member come up with a project idea of his or her own. This can fit under the self-determined project area. A project can be designed to serve the individual's needs. Another benefit of this approach is that the individualized project proposal can be reviewed by the university's risk management or disability support service offices, to ensure that the project is safe.

An important point to remember when working with persons with disabilities is to keep the person—not the disability—first. The person's disability should be thought of as a characteristic of him or her, not the whole of who the person is. Describing “people first”

speech patterns is one way to remind oneself of this. For instance, a person would be referred to as having Down's syndrome instead of being a mentally retarded person or a Mongoloid. Each individual has his or her own set of attributes that goes beyond the type or status of a disability. The main point of this type of speech pattern is that the disability is referred to as part of the person and is not the definition of who he or she is.¹⁸

Inclusive 4-H Fact Sheets:

One may think: “An inclusive 4-H program sounds ideal, but how do I make it happen and how do I work with those with disabilities?” A series of fact sheets have been written to explain different disabilities and give extension educators, 4-H leaders and others ideas for working with children having various types of disabilities. Each fact sheet includes suggestions for educators and leaders to consider when working with members with a particular disability. The articles also list web sites for more information on each disability. The intent of these materials is to serve as a resource for 4-H educators and leaders who will be working with members with disabilities. And, to help each 4-H educator and leader become interested in and excited about being involved in an inclusive organization that provides youth of all abilities the opportunity to be a 4-H member. (www.uwyo.edu/wyo4H/inclusive)

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Notes

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