K-STATE Research and Extension

Making a Difference

2012–2013

# Positive Youth Development Enhances Skills Needed for Work

## Situation

Employers nationwide report that more and more high school graduates lack the skills needed for work. Among those surveyed by K-State Research and Extension in 2007, 91% reported that it was very or somewhat important to help youth ages 10 through 19 "master positive life skills" including communication, decision-making, goal-setting, and leadership. Since the 1970s, Kansas 4-H has identified interpersonal communication skills as one of five focus traits for youth development.

In 2011, the Department of 4-H Youth Development began a multiyear survey of Kansas 4-H youth who participate, either intentionally or informally, in methods of acquiring interpersonal communication skills. Over the past two years, 362 youth completed the communication section from the *Youth Life Skills Evaluation Project* developed by the late Dr. Susan Barkman of Purdue University and Dr. Krisanna Machtmes of Louisiana State University.

## What We Did

Local staff members used communication evaluation instruments across Kansas in 2012 and 2013 to evaluate interpersonal communication skill levels of 4-H members. Thirteen offices across the state completed 362 evaluations.

In addition to the evaluation project, a focus on science in 2013 gave staff an opportunity to train volunteers in connecting scientific inquiry to 4-H projects. "Tech Trunks" developed for five project areas used 4-H manuals and included materials for hands-on lessons. Training for staff and volunteers was offered statewide.

## Outcomes

Kansas 4-H members evaluated indicated they "often" or "always" used seven interpersonal communication skills. Their performance was rated at or nearly at the master level. The life skills gained share themes of compassion, sympathy, or empathy.

Respondents said they always or nearly always:

- try to maintain eye contact when talking to someone
- try to understand feelings when listening to someone
- change the way they talk to someone based on their relationship with that person
- try to see the other person's point of view
- use their experiences to let their friends know they understand what the friends are going through
- recognize when people are using their hands to reinforce what they are saying
- use tone of voice to reinforce what they are trying to say.

## Success Stories

***4-H Communications*** — A former Thomas County 4-H member often hears compliments for her ability to give presentations. She notes that she learned early and honed the skills through 4-H. Recently she made a presentation attended by the vice president of her company, who also praised her skills. Later, she mentioned that she had to thank her mother again for "making" her do presentations and also thank 4-H for her training.

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***4-H Science*** — As a result of the 4-H "Tech Trunk" training process, interns led a group of Hispanic men in a hands-on project. At the beginning of the session they seemed uninterested, but the hands-on approach engaged them in robotic learning activities. This group had no previous 4-H experience, but several of the men brought their families to 4-H activities as a result of this creative outreach effort.

***4-H Volunteerism*** — Sedgwick County has worked with a corporate volunteer to build a new program in meats judging. Through efforts of the volunteer, youth met several times a week to practice, took field trips, taught classes to other teens at Discovery Days, and started a "skillathon" at the county fair. The activities helped them gain life skills and prepared them to compete in national level meats judging contests. Dedicated volunteers come to the program from a variety of backgrounds and bring with them a passion to help youth learn and grow.

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