



## **Ages and Stages of 4-H Youth**

### **A Brief Introduction**

4-H is a unique program in many ways. One thing that makes 4-H special is that boys and girls of many different age groups may belong to the same club. When working with youth of varied ages, it is important to remember that each age represents certain common characteristics. Understanding these characteristics will help you ensure that each member is valued for their own unique contribution to the club regardless of age.

In the next few pages you will find information that will be helpful when planning activities for youth during your meetings and at other 4-H events. It is important to keep different age characteristics in mind when planning your meeting. It is also important to remember that not all children mature at the same rate. Some children will have characteristics of both younger and older ages, depending on their growth, both physically and emotionally. While these pages are designed to be a helpful guide, it is important to remain flexible and adjust your plan as appropriate for the ages of your club members.

### **Working with 4-H Cloverbuds: Youth in K–3rd Grades**

#### **How Youth are Involved**

Youth in grades K-3 are a part of the 4-H Cloverbud Program. Please see the section entitled *New Jersey 4-H Cloverbud Program: 4-H for Younger Members* for more information about this program. They can also participate in in-school and after-school 4-H programs. In addition, there are often special programs designed to meet their unique needs and interests.

#### **Specific Characteristics**

Youth in grades K-3 are easily motivated and eager to try new things. They tend to have short attention spans and work very much in the here and now. They are still developing language skills and may have a difficult time expressing themselves. At this age, they learn through experimental and exploratory behaviors. They have a strong desire for affection and adult attention and can be very sensitive to criticism.

#### **Some Tips to Use When Working with and Planning for Youth in Grades K-3**

- Plan a wide variety of activities that take a short time to complete, with each experience activity building on the previous activity.
- Free time should be planned and encouraged.
- Alternate a high activity level with low and moderate activities. (Example: play an active game that teaches about the food chain, and then sit and discuss what the youth learned from the activity.)
- Be very specific and clear with directions. It often helps to have youth repeat the directions back to you so that everyone understands.
- Provide positive encouragement and assistance during all activities.



- Use activities that foster cooperation and teamwork, not competition.
- Field trips, hands-on activities, and models are especially helpful for these youth.
- Plan activities that physically engage youth, such as games, crafts, and relays.

## Working with 4-H Youth: Grades 4-6

### How Youth are Involved

Youth in grades 4-6 are generally involved in standard 4-H clubs, as well as in school and after-school activities. There are often opportunities for them to begin exhibiting leadership through their clubs. There are also many special interest programs, 4-H camps, and county-wide events available to youth in this age group.

### Specific Characteristics

Youth in grades 4-6 are active and tend to have quite a bit of energy. They also enjoy group activities and prefer to socialize with their own gender. They often change interests rapidly and jump from one activity to another. Youth in this age group also tend to admire and imitate older boys and girls. They are easily motivated and eager to try new things. Recognition and praise for doing good work is appreciated by this age group. Youth in this age group often ask "why?" They may not like to keep records or see the value in them. In order to achieve their best performance, youth want and need guidance from adults.

### Some Tips to Use When Working with and Planning for Youth in Grades 4-6

- Emphasize hands-on learning and learn-by-doing activities.
- Group learning experiences are especially helpful for these ages.
- Encourage many brief learning experiences.
- If possible, work with teen volunteers and teen leaders (see *Working With Teen Leaders*).
- Provide a wide variety of learning experiences.
- Keep written work simple, and try to work on it as a group. Give clear directions and solicit the help of parents to help their children with written work.
- Make recognition available to those who earn it (example: stickers or buttons).
- Present recognition in front of peers and parents.
- Respond to "Why?" questions by encouraging self-expression and activities where youth can discover the answers.



## Working with 4-H Youth: Grades 7-9

### How Youth are Involved

Youth in grades 7-9 continue to be involved in standard 4-H clubs. They also have the opportunity for more leadership experiences through teen council, counselor-in-training programs at 4-H camp, and other programs specially designed for this age group. They may also participate in regional and state-wide programs and events.

### Specific Characteristics

Youth in grades 7-9 are likely to be concerned about physical development and being liked by friends. They desire independence but want and need their parents' help. They can be very self-conscious and need support to develop self-confidence. At this age youth also want to explore outside their own community. They are beginning to seriously think about what they will do when they grow up but are unclear about needs and values. Youth are becoming more interested in activities involving boys and girls, sports, and active games. They are also ready for longer, in-depth learning experiences.

### Some Tips to Use When Working with and Planning for Youth in Grades 7-9

- Encourage learning experiences related to understanding yourself and getting along with others.
- Encourage working with adults and older teens to complete learning experiences and apprenticeship programs.
- Concentrate on developing individual skills.
- Give youth opportunity to practice leadership roles, with coaching and support from adults.
- Encourage work with older teens and adults (see *Working With Teen Leaders*).
- Provide learning experiences and trips outside of the community.
- Relate what is happening to different career choices.
- Encourage learning experiences involving both boys and girls.
- Encourage active, fun learning experiences.
- Recognize that tasks can be more difficult and take longer to complete.
- Have youth take on leadership roles and encourage detailed record keeping of those experiences.
- Provide activities that are hands-on and skill centered in specific subject matter.



## Working with Youth: Grades 10-13

### How Youth are Involved

By the time youth are in grades 10-13, they are generally developing leadership skills. They often serve as teen leaders in a club, as members of teen council, and in a variety of other leadership roles. At this point, there are also many opportunities for involvement with 4-H on the state and national level. These youth are role models for younger 4-Hers.

### Specific Characteristics

This age group has a high level of social needs and desires. They want and need a strong voice in planning their own program and aspire to adult leadership roles. They have developed a pattern of interest that is more defined and are looking for guidance in selecting careers. Youth of this age are also developing a stronger community consciousness and beginning to think of leaving home for college, employment, and independent living.

### Some Tips to Use When Working with and Planning for Youth in Grades 10-13

- Emphasize leadership life skills that relate to social development.
- Provide opportunities for self-expression.
- Encourage youth to plan programs with guidance and support of adult helpers.
- Encourage working with adult role models.
- Guide and counsel youth rather than give directions.
- Help youth engage in learning activities that involve the community.
- Apply leadership life skills to being on their own.

*Revised by Terri Yost.*

*Written by Betty Ann Smith and Rita Natale Saathoff.*

### References

Adapted from the North Dakota State University 4-H Curriculum Guidelines.

Curriculum Development for Issues Programming, A National Handbook for Extension Youth Development Professionals, Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1992.

***For more information on New Jersey 4-H, please visit [www.nj4h.rutgers.edu](http://www.nj4h.rutgers.edu).***

Cooperating Agencies: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and County Boards of Chosen Freeholders. Rutgers Cooperative Extension, a unit of the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, is an equal opportunity program provider and employer.