Eight Elements
Essential for Positive Youth Development

Just like other living things, youth need nourishing, supportive and protective environments in which they can grow into healthy and contributing adults. Youth need to know others care about them. They also need to believe they are capable of being successful and be confident they are able to influence people and events. In addition, they need opportunities to practice helping others.

Most youth grow up in environments that support healthy development. However, many youth lack the essential elements for growth. Having adults enhance settings with positive elements that lead to positive youth development is important. Some experts call positive elements for youth development protective factors. These protective factors or positive elements promote healthy behaviors and decrease risky behaviors. In 2002, human development experts discovered that young people develop positive characteristics in settings that have a positive social environment, such as 4-H programs and activities.

A team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team has identified eight critical elements that must exist for youth to have opportunities and experiences that are positive and effective. Those eight essential elements are:

- Positive relationships with caring adults
- A safe emotional and physical environment
- An inclusive environment
- Engagement in learning
- Opportunity for mastery
- Opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future
- Opportunity for self-determination
- Opportunity to value and practice service to others

These eight essential elements are the framework for developing 4-H program environments and opportunities and measuring their effectiveness.

Sources:
Essential Elements Curriculum, Essential Elements National 4-H Learning Priority Team
Sharon Query, 4-H youth development specialist, NDSU Extension Service
Katie Lefor, graduate assistant, North Dakota Center for 4-H Youth Development
Positive Relationships With a Caring Adult

The supportive relationships encountered by youth who participate in 4-H programs or other youth organizations often are taken for granted. Many youth have parents who are involved in these youth organizations as committed volunteers. Yet other youth lack nurturing relationships because the adults in their lives can't or won't take the time to get involved when needed. If a supportive adult is not present, organizations such as 4-H, Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts may not be successful in influencing the growth and development of today's youth.

A positive relationship with a caring adult is one of eight elements a team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team determined are essential for youth development. A caring adult acts as an adviser, mentor, teacher, coach and guide and helps set boundaries and expectations for young people. A positive relationship with a caring adult develops when adults learn about the interests of youth or pay attention to the activities of individual youth members outside meetings, events and an organization's activities. Positive relationships between youth and adults help youth establish feelings of belonging by letting youth know someone cares about them and they are accepted by others.

Some ways to support a positive relationship with a caring adult are:

- Train adult leaders in listening skills.
- Structure group activities so both youth and adults have time to learn about one another.
- Encourage adults to interact with youth, not just act as chaperones or supervisors.

These positive connections with adults can help youth develop supportive relationships that last for a lifetime. As organizations serving youth continue to reach new levels of preparing youth for the future, adult involvement will remain the core of their success.

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Youth Need a Safe Emotional and Physical Environment

The likelihood of engaging youth in activities or organizations is very slim when they are uncomfortable with their surroundings. Members of 4-H or other youth organizations should not fear physical or emotional harm from a learning environment or adults and other participants. Adult volunteers also may be reluctant to participate in programs in which they are not equipped to handle certain situations or emergencies.

A safe emotional and physical environment is one of eight elements a team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team determined are essential for youth development. Youth groups should not permit bullying, cliques or put-downs. Adults should incorporate safety into all meetings, camps, events and trips.

Ensuring a safe environment can take many forms:

- Screen adult leaders and volunteers before they begin working with youth groups.
- Continually train adult leaders and volunteers in safety and child protection.
- Consider conducting background checks to qualify adult volunteers to serve in specific roles.
- Evaluate physical space to guarantee it is safe.
- Train adults and other leaders in risk management and how to be consistent in dealing with misbehavior.

Youth also can play a role in helping identify safe locations. Youth are aware of which areas in their community may be unsafe and which programs and settings are the most appealing to their peers. Another step to providing a safe emotional and physical environment is to survey youth about the ways to make improvements. Youth and adult volunteers deserve to have a safe and secure place to reach desirable developmental outcomes.

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Inclusive Environment
Develops Sense of Belonging

Today’s youth often deal with negative factors in their lives. They are no different from youth in years gone by. Developing connections with other people is important for youth. 4-H programs and other youth organizations are great ways for youth to have a chance to form interpersonal relationships with a broad group of diverse individuals.

An inclusive environment is one of eight elements a team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team determined are essential for youth development. An inclusive environment develops a sense of belonging, supports members and offers encouragement with positive and specific feedback. However, an inclusive environment doesn’t occur if young people feel they are outsiders and are not welcomed by their peers.

In an inclusive environment, groups celebrate the success of all members and take pride in the collective efforts of all. When an inclusive environment occurs, youth members encourage each other during fair judging, at sports events and through academic challenges. Members feel as though they belong to a club or group while knowing they also belong to a larger state and national organization. Adults must be aware of whether they are sending a message to youth that they not welcome. To make sure youth are getting the right messages, adults need to offer opportunities of interest for youth from a variety of backgrounds.

Here are some ways to develop an inclusive environment:

- Use buttons, signs, banners, T-shirts, hats or other symbols to signify group membership.
- Provide many forms of recognition for all the youth involved, not just those who excel in competition with other youth.
- Offer youth a chance to develop clear and concise rules for participation and behavior, and follow up regularly by discussing ways to improve.
- Involve everyone right from the beginning through ice-breaker and get-acquainted activities.
- Help volunteers learn to be skilled in making young people feel at home in an organization.

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Encourage Engagement in Learning

A majority of young people gain learning experiences through school or work. However, many young people lack the exposure to additional opportunities that can help them master skills they need to be competitive in today’s world. Developing competencies through educational experiences that prepare youth socially, physically and academically is vital. Engagement in learning is one of eight elements a team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team determined are essential for youth development.

Engagement means the focus is on learning as a way to improve rather than proving you are the best or better than someone else. Someone who is engaged in learning is mindful of a subject area and builds relationships to develop greater understanding. Youth who are fully engaged in learning have high levels of self-motivation and an unlimited capacity for creativity.

Engaging youth to the point where they are passionate about learning can be hard. But when they are members of a youth organization engaged in learning, such as 4-H, they work together, plan activities, and enjoy being together and being involved. They also become leaders of the group by choice.

Here are some ways to support engaged learning:

■ Provide opportunities where youth can be intellectually stimulated and challenged.
■ Help youth design projects that make a difference to others.
■ Create experiences with youth that relate to real-life situations.
■ Provide youth with opportunities to experience what they have learned by performing these practical skills competently, such as doing public speaking, serving as a youth representative on a camp planning committee, judging a 4-H event or serving on a local community board or task force.
■ Have youth help with the planning, implementation and evaluation stages of an activity.

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Mastery Develops Confidence

Small accomplishments by children can lead to an enthusiasm to work toward greater, life-changing accomplishments when they get older. Self-confidence and a sense of meaningful accomplishment lead young people to feel a sense of mastery.

Mastery is one of eight elements a team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team determined are essential for youth development. It is building knowledge, skills and attitudes, then reaching a goal and demonstrating the competent use of the knowledge and skills in a proficient manner. Mastery is related to self-efficacy, a belief that one can succeed.

The level of mastery is dependent on the youth’s developmental ability. Youth gain mastery in social, academic, physical, artistic and vocational areas. When youth have the opportunity for mastery, they grow in projects that capture their interest. Also, youth eventually assist or mentor others in the same interest area or skill and demonstrate what they have learned and the skills they have developed.

The following are ways to support mastery:

■ Help youth establish realistic, challenging and achievable goals.
■ Provide opportunities for youth to practice and demonstrate their skills to others.
■ Allow time for youth to reflect on their accomplishments, setbacks, growth and pride.
■ Plan developmentally appropriate activities and accommodate diverse learning styles.
■ Provide a number of opportunities for youth to serve as teachers of others, and provide youth with training in how to successfully teach others.

Youth programs might reward mastery through Scout badges, sports letters, ribbons and scholarships. Remember, these are symbols of the time, skill, commitment and endurance required for true mastery. In the long term, however, symbols don’t mean as much as young people knowing they completed a task and did it well, and that in the future, they’ll succeed at other tasks.

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Youth Need to See Themselves as Active Participants in the Future

Some youth don’t see a future for themselves, or they may see a future, but they don’t accept it. The ability to see yourself in the future is to have hope and optimism to make life choices that assist in your transition into the future. When young people believe they don’t have a future, they have no hope. Youth who believe they have no future are less likely to consider the consequences of their actions.

Having the opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future is one of eight elements a team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team determined are essential for youth development. Youth have the opportunity to see themselves as active participants in the future when they draw on their various interests to help choose possible career paths and hobbies. This element also is present when youth make plans for the coming year, they look forward to being a leader in an organization or club, or the organization or club shares excitement about a future activity or opportunity.

By encouraging youth to set achievable goals for themselves for five to 10 years into the future, adults support the opportunity for youth to participant in the future. Other ways to provide opportunities for youth are:

■ Help them realize some of their goals through programs and projects.
■ Give youth opportunities to develop an idea and see it through to completion.
■ Encourage youth to think positively.

Youth benefit from knowing the future is worth the effort of working for it. 4-H is one of many youth organizations that encourage goal setting, planning and progress toward a better future. Schools offer classes that prepare students to set goals for graduation and beyond. Sports teams practice every week to be ready for future games.

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Self-determination
Important Step Toward Adulthood

Do you remember when you made your first important decision? You might remember feeling excited, scared or liking the feeling of being independent. That independence meant you had the ability to think, feel, make decisions and act on your own. Independence is part of being an adult. Having the opportunity for self-determination is one of eight elements a team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team determined are essential for youth development.

Self-determination exists when youth members choose projects, activities or hobbies or decide to drop out of organizations or teams based on their changing interests and abilities. Other ways youth display self-determination are considering for themselves what went well and what they would do differently the next time they try something or choosing and planning organizational and team events.

Youth need to know they have influence over their lives. Youth develop responsibility and discipline when they acquire independence. Youth programs such as 4-H are a great way for youth to learn how to make good decisions and obtain independence. Some examples of how adults can support youth in gaining self-determination and independence are:

- Give youth opportunities to set their own goals.
- Provide an environment in which youth can try new things and challenge themselves safely.
- Avoid solving problems for youth; allow them to come to their own solutions. Being supportive and acting more like a guide is important.

4-H fosters independence by encouraging youth to make decisions about which events they want to attend and which projects they want to complete. Through informed decisions and independence, youth are able to discover their genuine selves.

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Service to Others

Adds Meaning to Life

People need to feel their lives have a purpose and are meaningful. The opportunity to value and practice service to others allows individuals to find themselves and feel their lives have meaning. That opportunity is one of eight elements a team of evaluators from the National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team determined are essential for youth development.

Service is a way for individuals to acquire exposure to a larger community and the world. It also helps them develop a sense of generosity. Having young people learn what opportunities exist for them to connect to their communities and how they can give back to other people is very important. When youth value and practice service to others, they feel good about serving others through community improvement projects and show mutual support for others in an organization. Youth who learn to contribute their time and talents to help others in need likely will continue to serve others as adults.

Some ways adults can help youth value and practice service to others are:

- Offer opportunities for youth to practice and show skills to others.
- Allow time for youth to reflect on their successes, setbacks, growth and pride.
- Offer opportunities for youth to teach others.
- Plan developmentally appropriate activities. Meaningful service learning helps young people understand who they are as well as understand others.

4-H and other youth organizations provide youth with service learning projects that build youths’ capacity to approach problems as a member of society and help them feel their lives have meaning and purpose.

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