



---

## 4-H Youth Development Theoretical Framework<sup>1</sup>

Youth development is the natural process of developing one's capacities. While it occurs through youth's daily experiences with people, places and possibilities, it is far too important to be left to chance" (National 4-H Leadership Trust, 2002). 4-H and Youth Development addresses program development for youth, and the preparation and engagement of young people.

Effective youth development programs are based on basic and applied research. Developing programs for youth that will produce positive outcomes requires appropriate program design and planning, implementation, and evaluation. Programs also must be attractive to youth, so that they will voluntarily participate.

Positive relationships with a caring adult, a safe environment, opportunities for youth to develop mastery (building of knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes), and the ability to demonstrate their new skills in public service are essential elements of effective programming for youth. Research indicates that youth development programs addressing these components are more likely to result in healthy and happy children, who demonstrate a sense of maturity and civic engagement as adults and become stronger individuals, creating stronger families and better communities.

4-H is the only national youth development organization that is federally mandated to conduct positive youth development programs. 4-H youth development seeks to promote positive youth development, facilitate learning and engage youth in the work of the Land Grant Universities and in their communities to enhance the quality of life. The educational foundation for 4-H lies in three mission areas tied to the knowledge base of the Land Grant University and USDA: science, engineering and technology; healthy lifestyles and citizenship.

4-H youth development programs began over a hundred years ago with local "corn clubs" in which extension agents worked with rural youth to introduce new varieties of corn as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Extracted from the CSREES Self-Review for 2006 Portfolio Review Expert Panel, Portfolio 2.2 Improved Quality of Life in Rural Areas; Supporting Objective 2.2: Provide Science-Based Technology, Products, and Information to Facilitate Informed Decisions Affecting the Quality of Life in Rural Areas

CSREES Goal 2: Support Increased Economic Opportunities and Improved Quality of Life in Rural America. For the full report go to:  
<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/business/reporting/portfolios.html>

means of persuading elders to adopt new technologies. Over time, these clubs became organized youth programs, expanded to teaching youth more skills in agriculture, and then expanded to youth development more broadly.

In a parallel development, researchers, youth workers, and policy makers realized that it was both short-sighted and expensive to focus national attention and resources too narrowly, with interventions directed to “target populations” of troubled youth with deep-seated problems. More attention began to be paid to what factors seemed to make some youth resilient and able to overcome adversity, and ways in which problems among youth could be prevented at earlier ages (and at lower cost). Public concern and policy concerning youth also have shifted from public investments in programs targeting specific problems and threats to young people (teen smoking, sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancy, alcohol and other drug use, juvenile delinquency and youth crime) to a broader, more holistic view of helping youth to realize their full potential. (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, 2002)

As attention was being paid to the divide between youth who were thriving and doing well, and those who were not, increased attention was paid to emerging gaps among the youth. Public policy toward youth turned to efforts to ensure that all children and youths have greater opportunities to reach their potential, and that our systems track all our youth – not only our best-achieving youth or our most distressed youth.

At the same time, a significant proportion of American children are at substantial risk for negative outcomes -- abuse, neglect, poor health, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, violence. In 2003, 18 percent of all children ages 0-17 lived in poverty<sup>2</sup>. Poverty exacerbates other risk factors, and is the central reason many children and families do not thrive. These children and youth need to be in environments where they have opportunities to acquire the basic skills they need to become responsible family members, participants in the work force and contributing citizens.

Children with parents in the military face many challenges as their parents move frequently and are deployed for long periods and to dangerous locations. Other children and adults often do not understand military culture and the impacts of deployments, separations, or reunions on these youth and their families. Youth in military families need help in connecting with other youth, caring adults, and community programs and services which are sensitive to their specific situations and needs as their parents serve the country.

Some rural youth experience less community interconnection of people due to long commute times; are impacted by diverse populations; experience geographic isolation; have fewer physical locations in which to interact with peers and adults; have limited programs and opportunities; limited employment opportunities; and have less access to

---

<sup>2</sup> Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2005). *Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2005*. [On-line]. Available at: [www.ChildStats.gov](http://www.ChildStats.gov)

technology at home when compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. In contrast, rural youth often have a greater opportunity to assume leadership roles when their communities are viable.

4-H Youth development is at a watershed point as a result of a number of converging forces:

- Expansion of the 4-H program to include more participants in new program areas,
- Greater integration of research, education, and extension work (and research streams outside CSREES),
- Increasing professionalism of youth workers.

The 4-H program model, with over a 100 year history, has been adapted to new initiatives, including: partnerships with defense agencies to support children in military families (Army, Air Force, and other service branches); efforts to strengthen states' ability to address high risk youth (Children, Youth, and Families at Risk grant program); and programs to support rural children, youth, and families (Rural Youth Development program). The new initiatives continue to emphasize community youth development programs, designed to provide beneficial, positive, and encouraging relationships with adults and peers, sustain them over time, and give youth opportunities to build their skills and become engaged as partners in their own development and their communities' development.

4-H programs address diverse populations through a large and complex system. The 4-H program combines the cooperative efforts of nearly 7 million youth; the National 4-H Headquarters in the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) of the US Department of Agriculture; volunteer leaders and professional staff; state land-grant universities; state and local governments; private-sector partners; state and local 4-H foundations; and the National 4-H Council. 4-H programs are conducted in the United States, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, Micronesia, and Northern Mariana Islands. 4-H-type programs are also international, with youth in more than 80 countries in similar, independent programs.

A logic model drawing from the theoretical framework has been developed and describes the anticipated impacts of youth development as it relates to F4-HN and CSREES. Impacts include: Youth will exemplify the knowledge, skills and behaviors for fulfilling lives, improved social, environmental and economic conditions in communities.