



High Energy 4-H Clubs

What makes a 4-H club exciting for its members? What are the characteristics of the clubs that are full of life and activity? Kirk Astroth, Extension Specialist with Montana State University researched the essential characteristics of healthy and vibrant 4-H clubs.

1. They are concerned with weaning not winning.

Kids are the focus of vibrant clubs. Effective 4-H clubs help members develop a sense that they own the group. Members in such programs, particularly older members, feel that the group is theirs and they want adults to reduce their part in decision-making. Fun... learning... growth - these are the important concerns in vibrant groups; training youth to become independent, thinking people is their goal. Less effective groups focus on winning, beating others and being the best.

2. They change how they do things but not what they do.

Truly effective youth groups are firm yet flexible. They try new activities and experiment within a certain accepted structure and organizational culture. As one member said, our club is really original in our meetings. At the same time successful clubs provide consistency and reliability a member can count on. The clubs meet regularly and consistently; traditions, rituals and ceremonies are used to ensure a sense of continuity with the past and with the organization as a whole.

3. They work hard and play hard.

Successful 4-H clubs provide a way for members to do things together in fun ways –club tours, weekend trips, campouts, etc. They also work hard and become involved in their community through projects like highway cleanup, fundraisers and volunteering at senior centers. Effective clubs help develop an ethic of community service. As one member observed, “In our club, you have a lot of responsibility, but the work is fun. It’s hard but it is worth it.”

4. They empower rather than embalm members.

Empowerment means to authorize, delegate, enable, or permit a person to do something. Vibrant 4-H clubs enable youth to do what they are able to do. They empower members to develop personal responsibility.

5. They teach communication and listening skills.

Members of successful 4-H clubs feel listened to, respected, and their input is genuinely valued. These members also communicate well and listen to one another.

6. There is a balance between chaos and rigidity.

Ordered chaos is the order of the day in successful 4-H clubs. This means that the group can change as needed - change rules, power structure and relationships. Ineffective groups are often paralyzed by change.

7. They support each other.

Members in successful 4-H clubs support and celebrate each others successes. They take pride in the accomplishments of all members and the collective efforts of the group as a whole. It is not necessary to be the best, rather to do our best. Leaders encourage members with positive feedback.

8. They use mentoring to bring newcomers into the group.

Buddy systems are common and great effort is made to help new members learn the language and traditions of the club.

9. They take time for training.

Effective clubs take time to train members for the roles they will assume in adulthood.

10. They value and practice service to others.

Successful 4-H clubs provide opportunities for youth to participate in community service and citizenship activities, connecting them to communities and learning to give back to others.

All of these characteristics are equally important for a 4-H club to be truly vibrant. The elements work together in synergy, creating energy far in excess of the contributions of any individual. Youth acquire a sense of significance from doing significant things and from being participants in their own education.