

# The Value of Teen Leadership: Quick Guide

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During the summer months of 2017, a team of Virginia 4-H Extension agents and a 4-H Extension specialist surveyed currently active teen 4-H members and their parents/guardians to gather insight on the following questions:

- How did they become involved in 4-H?
- What keeps them engaged in the program?
- What have they learned as a result of their participation?
- How are they using what they have learned?
- How familiar are they with the variety of opportunities available to teen 4-H members?

As a result, 233 teens and 388 parents/guardians responded to the survey. The respondents represented all four districts of Virginia Cooperative Extension and 71 of the 106 counties and cities in Virginia. The age range of teen respondents was 13-19 years old. This publication highlights the key findings from the study.

## How Teens Became Involved in 4-H (Teen Responses)

- 28% through the camping program.
- 26% through club involvement.
- 14% because of their parents/guardians.
- 13% because of their friend(s).
- 10% through a school program.
- 7% not specified.
- 2% through 4-H advertising.

## How Teens Became Involved in 4-H (Parent/Guardian Responses)

- 33% through club involvement.
- 20% through the camping program.
- 18% because of their friend(s).
- 12% because of their parents/guardians.
- 8% through a school program or other involvement.
- 8% not specified.
- 1% through 4-H advertising.

## What Keeps Teens Engaged in 4-H?

According to parents/guardians and teens alike, three elements are key to continuous teen involvement within the Virginia 4-H Program:

- Fun (13%).
- Friendships (12%).
- Leadership development (12%).

It can be concluded that families place a significant value on organizations and programs that set fun and friendship as a priority. Thus, 4-H can ensure retention of families by using this data to incorporate fun into their programming and having teens recruit membership through their network of friends. Furthermore, focusing on the social aspects of clubs and programs, and not just the educational development, will help keep families involved in 4-H for the long term.

## What Life-Skills Are Gained as a Result of 4-H Participation?

Teens and parents/guardians were also asked what skills teens gained due to their participation in 4-H. The skills

were chosen based on the Life Skills Wheel created by Iowa State University (<https://fyi.uwex.edu/wi4hvolunteers/files/2016/06/Life-Skills-Wheel.pdf>). Parents/guardians and teens had many similarities in their results and agreed that teamwork, social skills, self-responsibility, communication, and leadership are the top skills that were highly enhanced by 4-H participation. The results correlate directly with the Tufts Study on 4-H Youth Development (<https://4-h.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/4-H-Study-of-Positive-Youth-Development-Full-Report.pdf>) and enhance its findings regarding the impact 4-H has on young people.

## How Acquired Life Skills Are Used

Teens were asked how they used the life skills gained in 4-H in other areas of their lives. They mentioned using their skills in school, clubs, sports, and extracurricular activities and at work. Other teens reported using skills from 4-H for better communication, relationships and public speaking and in social settings. Some selected responses from the 194 teen respondents follow (39 teens didn't respond to this question) :

- “They help me with communication and help me solve problems that I sometimes experience in my life.”
- “At school and home — especially public speaking.”
- “It helped me get a job.”
- “Job interview, class presentations, conversation with others.”
- “4-H has changed me for the better to be able to talk to new people, get involved, and not to be scared to express my opinion.”
- “Yes, they help me in my high school career and will help me qualify for college scholarships.”
- “It's helped me with learning how to help other people with different leadership skills and develop citizenship skills outside, whether it's in school, church, or communities.”

## Familiarity With 4-H Opportunities

Four-H provides many opportunities for teens to be involved and engaged beyond the local level. To gather insight on how familiar teens as well as their parents/guardians are with the opportunities afforded to them (or their child), respondents were asked to rate their familiarity with various 4-H teen opportunities, ranging from “extremely familiar” to “unfamiliar.”

Teens and parents/guardians rated themselves as most familiar with the following opportunities:

- 52% of parents/guardians and 64% of teens who responded rated themselves extremely or very familiar with camp counselor opportunities at our six 4-H educational centers.
- 45% of parents/guardians and 60% of teens were extremely or very familiar with 4-H teen volunteer opportunities.
- 35% of parents/guardians and 40% of teens were extremely or very familiar with 4-H judging.

Teens rated themselves as unfamiliar with the following opportunities:

- 86% of teens were unfamiliar with Citizenship Washington Focus.
- 81% of teens were unfamiliar with International 4-H Youth Exchange (IFYE) Ambassador opportunities.
- 80% of teens were unfamiliar with Leadership Washington Focus.

Parents/guardians rated themselves as unfamiliar with the following opportunities:

- 77% of parents/guardians were unfamiliar with IFYE Ambassador opportunities.
- 70% of parents/guardians were unfamiliar with the Southern Region Teen Leadership Conference.
- 68% of parents/guardians were unfamiliar with the Virginia Tech 4-H Collegiate Host Weekend.

To help educate teens and adults on the various leadership opportunities available to them, agents can distribute the Virginia 4-H brochure “Opportunities for Senior 4-H Members”, which can be purchased through the Virginia Cooperative Extension Storefront ([storefront.ext.vt.edu](http://storefront.ext.vt.edu)). Agents can also invite teens, volunteers, and Extension staff to local teen club meetings to speak about their leadership experiences from these programs and what they learned as a result.

## Summary

In conclusion, the researchers think the findings from this study will be beneficial to all professionals working with 4-H youth. Using what was learned from this study and making changes at the unit level will help ensure that 4-H youth stay engaged in the program and take advantage of the various opportunities available to them. Furthermore, more focus and attention on those life skills not rated highly by participants can help make certain that 4-H professionals are developing well-rounded individuals who can transfer these skills into their everyday lives.