

4-H Volunteer Leaders' Series

Experiential Learning in 4-H Project Experiences

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As a 4-H leader have you ever been in this situation? You have volunteered to be the leader or helper of a 4-H project club. A project meeting is scheduled for this evening. You have the challenge of planning the meeting.

You might ask:

- Q. What should the members know or be able to do at the end of the meeting?
- Q. What method would be best for the topic?
- Q. How could the information or skill be presented?
- Q. What will make the biggest impact on their everyday lives?

This fact sheet will help you answer these questions. Five key areas are outlined: Exploring the Experiential Learning Model, Selecting the Life Skill to Be Practiced, Choosing a Method, Processing the Experience and Evaluating the Project Activity. Each will assist you in completing a brief overview of a project experience such as the following:

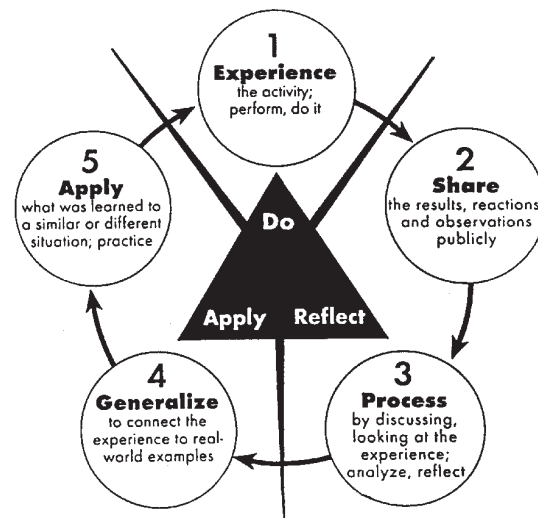


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Topic:
Project skill:
Life skill:
Success indicator:
Supplies needed:
Experience/activity:
Questions to ask to process the activity–
Sharing questions:
Processing questions:
Generalizing questions:
Application questions:
Evaluation strategy:

Exploring the Experiential Learning Model

The 4-H program has adopted a process that allows youth to first learn by doing before being told or shown how and then process the experience. The experiential learning model developed by Pfeiffer and Jones (1985) and modified by 4-H includes five specific steps:



1. Participant(s) **experience** the activity – perform or do it.
2. Participant(s) **share** the experience by describing what happened.
3. Participant(s) **process** the experience to determine what was most important and identify common themes.
4. Participant(s) **generalize** from the experience and relate it to their daily lives.
5. Participant(s) **apply** what they learned to a new situation.

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When this model is used, youth both experience and process the activity. They learn from thoughts and ideas about the experience. Each step contributes to their learning.

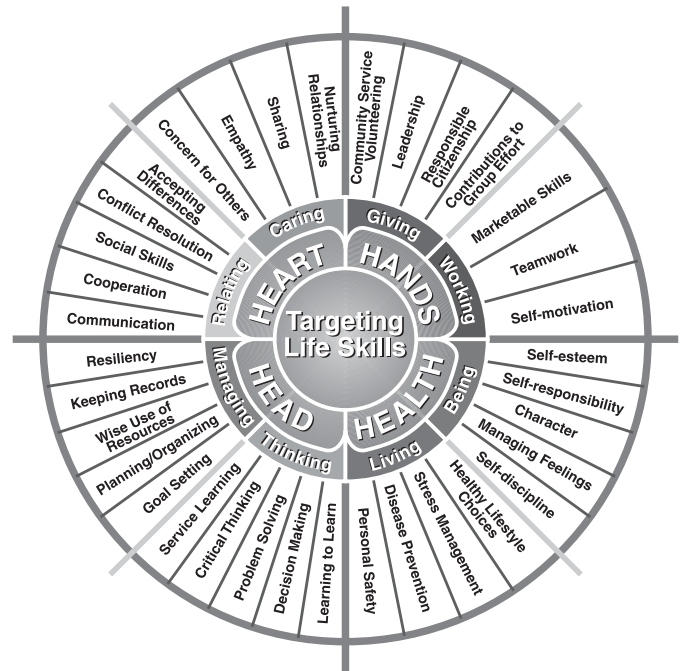
Providing an experience alone does not create experiential learning. Experiences lead to learning if the participant understands what happened, sees patterns of observations, generalizes from those observations and understands how to use the generalization again in a new situation. The nationally juried 4-H curriculum materials for both youth and helpers include experientially based activities. The advantages of using the experiential learning process in group settings include:

- The helper quickly assesses youth's knowledge of the subject.
- The helper builds on the youth's experience or knowledge.
- The helper is a coach rather than an up-front teacher.
- The youth relate the experience to their own lives and experiences.
- Helpers may use a variety of methods to involve the youth in the experience and processing.
- Youth with many different learning styles can be successful.
- Discussions move from the concrete to the abstract and analytical.
- Youth are stimulated to learn through discovery and to draw meaning from the experience.
- Helper and participant learn together in a cooperative way, rather than in a teacher-student relationship.
- Youth work together, share information, provide explanations and evaluate themselves and others.
- Youth take responsibility for their own learning.

Selecting the Life Skill to Be Practiced

One of the primary goals of the 4-H program is to help youth develop important life skills that they can use every day. Life skills are tools youth (and adults) use to cope with daily circumstances, make important

decisions and enhance the quality of their daily lives. Life skills help youth become competent, capable and contributing individuals. Some life skills for the four H's – head, heart, hands and health – are shown below in the **Targeting Life Skills Model** (Hendricks 1996).



When the 4-H program began, the purpose was primarily to teach youth project skills such as how to raise corn, livestock and vegetables as well as how to cook a meal. Today the primary goal of 4-H is youth development. Projects are used as a way for youth to practice and learn life skills. Strong project experiences are essential. Today a variety of methods are used to involve the youth in the experience so they practice important life skills as they explore the project. For example, to teach decision-making skills youth actually practice decision-making skills and discuss how they used them.

A well-designed activity may provide opportunities to practice several life skills. However, in order to help youth process what they have practiced, one life skill should be targeted and emphasized.

Choosing a Method

Many teaching methods can be adapted to almost any subject matter. The method selected depends on the learners, the life skills targeted and the way the learners can become involved with the content. The

method selected should be one that allows the youth to learn by doing, discover, practice the life skill and project skill targeted for the activity and have fun. The subject matter or topic usually doesn't limit the choice of the method. The life skill to be practiced will. If the intent is to have the youth practice decision making, then the method needs to provide opportunities to practice decision making as they explore the subject matter. Here are some popular methods used in 4-H to promote life skill development. Following each method is one or more life skills that could be targeted using that method.

METHOD	LIFE SKILL
<i>Playing a game</i>	team work, risk taking
<i>Giving presentations</i>	communicating
<i>Judging activities</i>	communicating, decision making
<i>Planning activities</i>	team work, planning, leadership
<i>Role playing</i>	communicating, relating to others
<i>Experiments</i>	decision making, problem solving
<i>Interviewing others</i>	communicating, relating to others
<i>Solving a problem</i>	decision making, problem solving
<i>Making models and products</i>	problem solving, leadership, utilizing resources
<i>Learning a skill</i>	many life skills

The 4-H program has a long history of helping youth “learn by doing.” Methods like lectures and demonstrations that are often used in formal school settings do not support experiential learning. Rather than being an up-front teacher, teaching the youth what you want them to know or do, you instead help them learn by guiding the learning experience. You become a facilitator or coach. You involve the youth in ways they can discover for themselves instead of being put into a position of attempting to repeat what they have been told or shown. When the experiences are carefully designed, safely executed and thoughtfully processed, you provide tremendous potential for youth development and growth.

Processing the Experience

Debriefing or “processing” the experience is what moves an experience beyond “learning by doing.” The primary purpose of debriefing is to allow participants the opportunity to integrate their learning. They have a sense of closure or completeness to their experience. In order for youth to take what they have just experienced and use it effectively in their everyday lives,

they must think about it and interpret its meaning for themselves (Hammel 1986).

As the leader of the group you can assist in this process by:

- Setting aside enough time to reflect on the experience(s).
- Asking the right questions.
- Planning appropriate activities that will help youth reflect on their experiences.
- Listening to the youth carefully.
- Supporting each youth’s unique learning style.

The reflection and application steps of the experiential learning model help expand the learning potential. Each of the four reflection and application steps of the model comes to life when the helper asks appropriate questions to generate discussion and youth self-discovery. Each step should be explored before moving to the next step in relation to both the project skill and the life skill. The questions asked following the experience are critical. If the questions help youth explore the activity from their own perspectives, generalize to their own lives and see how to apply what they learned, then the goal has been reached. However, if the questions are perceived by the participants to be an oral test of their knowledge, then much of the benefits of using the experiential model are lost.

The following are examples of generic questions for each step of the experiential cycle:

Share

- What did you do?
- What did your group do when . . . ?
- What did you see? Feel? Hear? Taste?
- What was most difficult? Easiest?

Process

- What problems or issues seemed to occur over and over?
- What did you learn about (life skill or activity subject matter) through this activity?
- Why is the life skill you practiced important?

Generalize

- What similar experiences have you had (with this life skill or subject matter)?
- What similar challenge/problem/feeling have you faced? What did you do then?

Apply

How does what you learned relate to other parts of your life?
How can you use what you learned?
How can you apply (the life skill you practiced) in the future?

As you facilitate processing the experience you will want to be very aware of the stage or step of the experiential model currently being discussed and how ready the group is to move to the next step. This will depend on the needs and abilities of the group.

Asking the right questions is itself a skill to be learned. Sometimes a short activity in which everyone answers the same open-ended question or simply finishes a sentence will get everyone focused. Finishing a statement like "I learned that . . ." or "I felt . . ." will stimulate discussion. You may want to form pairs or trios to discuss something and then have them share with the group the main points they discussed. Remember to move with the participants. Adjust based upon the responses they give. Continue to help them build on their experiences.

Evaluating the Project Activity

The most important question is whether the youth can show that they have gained new knowledge and practiced the life skill and the project skill. The success indicator for the activity should describe an

observable behavior or attitude change for both the project skill and life skill – for example, a success indicator like "Youth will use one or more steps of the decision-making model to solve the situation described (project related)."

The questions discussed in the processing and application steps of the experiential model will often provide excellent feedback. Even better evaluation information can be gathered by having the group apply what they have learned to another situation. If you use experiential learning successfully, some of the most important results will only happen as youth apply new skills in their everyday lives.

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