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The Difference 4-H Makes with Young People

Do you know what 4-H project area over 67% of Lincoln County 4-H members participate in? Many of you are probably thinking the animal science projects. Actually, it's the Arts and Communication projects making this the number one project area that youth are enrolled in again this year in Lincoln County. Arts and Communication projects include photography, speaking, visual arts, theater arts and computers. In addition to 4-H projects, youth in Lincoln County also have the opportunity to participate in Music and Lip Sync Festival, Speaking and Puppetry Contest, Drama Festival and Demonstrations and Illustrated Talk Contests.

Recently, the Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development Program released the findings of a statewide study which found that children that participate in 4-H arts and communications projects gain important technical, communication and teamwork skills, while increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence.

The 4-H Arts and Communication Program Evaluation surveyed 4-H participants in all of Wisconsin's 72 counties, as well as 4-H alumni and parents and positively outlined the impact of more than 80 project areas.

Using four Essential Elements that have been defined as vital to positive youth development, the evaluation found that kids who participate in the arts and communications programs show a powerful increase in both Mastery and Independence.

The surveyed children reported that their work with 4-H helped them improve their individual performance and creativity skills, build good learning habits as they integrated feedback from judges and other experts, and bolstered their opportunities to become confident public speakers.

The study's participants also displayed positive results in the elements of Belonging and Generosity as they learn to build networking skills, connect with peers with similar interests and learn to help younger members as they increase their own understanding.

Long lauded and recognized for its strong agricultural programs, 4-H has also had a strong interest in arts and communications projects dating back to the 1930s when University of Wisconsin Agriculture Dean Chris Christensen launched a statewide effort to deliver arts programs to rural and small communities, saying he wanted to "put the culture back in agriculture." The programs have grown strongly ever since, with more than 13,000 individual Wisconsin youth currently enrolled in more than 80 different projects areas and five statewide teams. According to the study, most of those youth are involved in two-to-four individual projects, with the most popular including photography, drawing, painting, ceramics, music and acting.

The 4-H arts and communications program serves as an entry point to the 4-H program for many children who might be too young to get involved in some of the other agricultural and sporting activities. Moving through generations, children are influenced by adults and other older family members to get involved in projects. Alumni respondents to the study often remarked about how much their experience with arts programs impacted their future career prospects.

Current participants often spoke about the freedom 4-H offers to choose the projects that interest them. Unlike a school setting, where an entire class might study one topic at a time, 4-H allows individuals to choose projects that fit their talents, interests and skills. 4-H also allows the opportunity for children to propose a new project, if their interests aren't included in the current collection of offered projects. The programs also lead to increased social skills as children work with both adults and peers that they don't meet in their schools.

Through UW-Extension, all Wisconsin people can engage in lifelong learning and access university resources, wherever they live and work. UW-Extension faculty and staff members work on all 26 University of Wisconsin campuses, in 72 county offices and at two tribal nations. UW-Extension programs are delivered by four main divisions: Broadcasting and Media Innovations; Business and Manufacturing Extension; Cooperative Extension; and Outreach and E-Learning Extension.

If you are interested in learning more about this study, the 4-H Arts and Communication projects/activities, or how to get involved in Lincoln County 4-H, please feel free to contact Debbie or Amanda at the UW-Extension office at 536-0304. 4-H is open to all youth throughout Lincoln County between kindergarten and one year past graduation from high school.