

4-H animal projects develop strong character, ethics and life skills

Middle and high school students who care for animals as part of UW-Extension 4-H projects gain skills that benefit them for a lifetime — accepting responsibility, communicating effectively, developing relationships, making decisions, organizing their work, setting and achieving goals — all grounded in the strong technical knowledge and values they acquire during their years of participation.

Situation

Animal Science is the largest Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development program with the most participants. UW-Extension offers 24 animal science projects statewide, supported by research-based educational materials tailored to the participant's age, skills and reading level. Each year, four district animal science days prepare 4-H youth for judging animal breeds at county fairs and stating their reasons. To assess the benefits to youth, a 4-H evaluation team — youth development and animal science specialists and county faculty — conducted a study to answer the question: “What is the value of Wisconsin animal science projects?”

Response

As the evaluation team gathered data, 13,000 Wisconsin youth were enrolled in an average of three 4-H animal projects each — beef, dairy, horse, horseless horse, swine, sheep, goats, poultry, emus, llamas, rabbits, dogs, cats, birds, tropical fish, and their care. First, the team identified key outcomes expected across all animal science projects. These clustered into four categories that parallel positive youth development described in the research literature. Studies link youth achieving these outcomes to life-long success in terms of economic self-sufficiency, civic responsibility, healthy families and social relationships:

1. **Life skills development** — Youth gain knowledge, skills and effective behaviors in leadership, decision-making, goal setting, organizing, developing relationships and communicating.
2. **Cognitive development** — Youth gain knowledge of technical subject matter, understand agricultural issues, and become informed consumers.
3. **Moral development** — Youth gain ethical knowledge and behaviors.
4. **Career exploration** — Youth gain interest in animal husbandry and the industry.

The team surveyed 384 rural and urban 4-H youth enrolled for at least three years and representing all 24 animal projects, comparing their self-assessments “now” and three years ago with those of 100 similar youth not in 4-H who also cared for animals for three years and with observations at 11 project sites. The evaluators summarized their

findings in the spring 2004 4-H Animal Science Program Evaluation at:
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/pdf/animalscience.pdf>

Impacts

The 4-H project participants reported taking daily care of animals, training animals regularly, making decisions based on what is best for the animal, controlling diseases and pests, and keeping records on their animals. The study found stronger character development, moral and ethical values among 4-H members than among their non-4-H peers. Middle and high school youth taking care of an animal as part of a 4-H project gain more knowledge, skills and behaviors that benefit them for a lifetime, as in the following examples.

Accepting responsibility — 4-H members reported significant improvements on every statement over the three years, with the greatest improvement on “making decisions about my animal based on what is best for the animal.”

Communicating — On average, 4-H members reported the most improvement in feeling confident while helping younger or less experienced people with their animals.

Decision-making — 4-H members reported greatest improvements in taking responsibility for decisions and getting information before making decisions.

Setting and achieving goals — The 4-H members reported greater improvement than the comparison group in achieving the goals they set.

88% of 4-H members regularly set goals for themselves.
70% of those not in 4-H regularly set goals.

Understanding animal husbandry — The 4-H members feel well-prepared to consider a career in animal husbandry or the industry. 4-Hers also reported a greater level of “animal know-how” than did the comparison youth:

92% or more of 4-H members reported acquiring technical knowledge of animal care, ideal traits, and the industry.
70% or less of those not in 4-H reported acquiring technical knowledge over the 3 years.

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