

Oregon 4-H Program
4-H as Positive Youth Development
October 2017

4-H is based on a positive youth development (PYD) approach that recognizes all youth have interests, abilities, and strengths that can be enhanced by participation in 4-H programs. Research shows¹ that participation in high quality 4-H programs increases thriving in youth, and thriving youth achieve important developmental outcomes, such as academic motivation and achievement.

To promote PYD, 4-H programs focus on four important things:

- **Facilitating youth sparks.** Sparks are the individual interests and passions that a young person brings to 4-H, for example an interest in animals, or computer science. 4-H provides an opportunity for youth to explore their sparks through programs based on their personal interests.
- **Creating an effective program setting.** To be effective, 4-H programs must be physically and emotionally safe, youth must feel welcome, that they belong and matter, and opportunities for structured learning, skill building and mastery must be provided. Programs also grow and change as the young person does, by placing an increasing emphasis on leadership², civic engagement³, and identity development⁴ in 4-H programs for teens.
- **Forming developmental relationships.** A positive, supportive relationship between youth and 4-H staff and volunteers is critical to youth development. These relationships are called “developmental” because they grow and change as the young person does. Developmental relationships challenge growth, provide support and encouragement, and, increasingly, share power between youth and adults.
- **Encouraging youth engagement.** 4-H has its greatest impact on positive youth development when youth are fully engaged in the program, especially when youth participate for multiple years in 4-H. Youth should be encouraged to participate in 4-H actively and regularly, as well as participate in extended 4-H learning opportunities at the local, state, national, and even international level.

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1. Arnold, M. E. & Gagnon, R. J. (2017). *The mediating effect of thriving on youth development program outcomes*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
 2. Lerner, R. M., & Lerner, J. V. (2013). *The positive development of youth: Comprehensive findings from the 4-H study of positive youth development*. Washington, DC: National 4-H Council.
 3. Ramey, H. L., Lawford, H. L., & Rose-Krasnor, L. (2017). Doing for others: Youth’s contributing behaviors and psychological engagement in youth-adult partnerships. *Journal of Adolescence*, 55, 129-138.
 4. Arnold, M. E. (in press). Supporting adolescent exploration and commitment: Identity formation, thriving and positive youth development. *Journal of Youth Development*.