



The four Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development work together to ensure that youth work towards a better future for themselves and their world. The four Essential Elements are:

- **Belonging**—Youth feel like they belong in a program that is safe and a positive environment.
- **Mastery**—Youth have an opportunity to build on skills and knowledge over time that will work towards the mastery of a certain subject.
- **Independence**—Youth have an opportunity to have influence over their lives, and the ability to see a path for their future and how they can work towards a positive future for themselves.
- **Generosity**—Youth are able to practice generosity by giving back to the larger community in some way through their service.

Belonging

A Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult

A caring adult acts as an advisor, guide and mentor. The adult helps set boundaries and expectations for young people.

Positive relationships with caring adults are a vital part of youth development. These relationships are supportive and safe. Youth feel comfortable asking questions, taking healthy risks, exploring their ideas and interests, and trying new things at age-appropriate levels. The caring adults set safe boundaries that fit the youth and their needs, model life-long learning, provide emotional and educational support, and encourage the youth. In short, the youth learn from the adults, and the adults learn from the youth in mutually supportive ways.



Positive Relationships with Caring Adults are present when:

- Volunteers provide clear guidance and support while allowing youth to learn, grow, and lead.
- Youth take on new age- and skill-level appropriate challenges, knowing that adults are available to answer questions and guide them.

An Inclusive Environment

An inclusive environment is one that creates a sense of belonging, encourages, and supports its members with positive and specific feedback.

Youth need to feel included in a meaningful way, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin, religion, age, language, sexual orientations, socioeconomic status, or ability.

Creating opportunities for youth to belong requires adults to remain open to learning, asking questions, and thinking about how the setting—for example, meeting spaces, workshops, events, or communications – may create barriers to participation. Consider what may make an individual youth feel excluded—such as language, culture, ability, background or other factors. Then, think about what changes might be needed to make sure everyone can participate equitably.

An Inclusive Environment is present when:

- Adults remain flexible to changing the way things are done to include every young person.
- Youth have the opportunity to understand and share their own identity in a safe space.

- Adults model acceptance and humility.
- Youth feel safe expressing themselves and learning about others.

A Safe Environment

Youth should not fear physical or emotional harm while participating in a 4-H experience whether from the learning environment itself, adults, other participants, or spectators.

Human beings are only able to learn and grow when they feel safe—both physically and psychologically. Physical safety means different things at different ages. For youth in grades K-2, physical safety means the space and activities should be so safe that even if they do not follow the directions exactly, they still won't be hurt. For older teens who need to be able to take bigger risks, physical safety means preparing them and minimizing the risks we know about.

Psychological safety means that young people feel mentally and emotionally safe. In a positive youth development setting, this means feeling a sense of belonging and having positive interactions with others. All youth need to feel included in a meaningful way, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientations, language, or ability.

A Safe Environment is present when:

- Adults are aware of the risks and have taken steps to prevent or minimize those risks.
- Adults communicate expectations that will keep all youth participants safe.
- Youth and adults commit to building an environment of respect and inclusion.

Independence

Opportunity to See Oneself as an Active Participant in the Future

The ability to see oneself in the future is to have hope and optimism to shape life choices to facilitate the transition into participating in the future.

Seeing oneself as an active participant in the future can mean many things in youth development. In a simple sense, it could be looking forward to an upcoming club meeting or 4-H event. Being an active participant in the future can also mean looking at life with a future orientation. One example may be a young person going to camp and seeing the potential for becoming a camp counselor.

4-H participation can also prepare youth for future careers directly—for example when they connect to projects or programs that spark an interest in a career path. It can also prepare youth indirectly—for example when youth develop life skills like communication and teamwork. One challenge for educators and volunteers is to help youth see and explore the wide range of opportunities available to them. Our role is to help guide them to the sparks that match their skills and interests.

Active Participation in the Future is present when:

- Youth members draw on their interests to help choose possible career paths and hobbies.
- Members look forward to being leaders in the organization or group.
- Youth make plans for the coming year.
- The club shares excitement about a future activity or opportunity.



Opportunity for Self-Determination

Youth must exercise a sense of influence over their lives, exercising their potential to become self-directing, autonomous adults.

Self-determination is about choice. Youth are able to influence the direction, projects and activities of 4-H clubs and programs. Giving them that opportunity helps them feel invested in the program. It provides them with the sense that they can have an impact on their world. Even seemingly simple choices help youth develop their potential to become self-directing, autonomous adults. Then, talking about what they've learned and what different choices they might make in the future help prepare them to make decisions throughout their lives.

It is important to view youth as resources to, as well as participants in, programs. In the 4-H model, it is part of their responsibility to lead and participate. When adults work with youth as partners in decision-making and program planning, we see the greatest growth in self-determination in our members.

Opportunities for Self-Determination are present when:

- Youth members choose to participate in (or not participate in) projects, activities, or hobbies.
- Youth consider for themselves, "What went well? What would I do differently the next time?"
- Youth take on leadership and partnership roles to choose and plan activities, team events, and projects.

Mastery

Opportunity for Mastery

Mastery is the building of knowledge, skills, and attitudes and then demonstrating the competent use of these knowledge and skills. The development of mastery is a process over time.

All youth want to be good at something. The volunteer's role is to help them develop and master skills and knowledge in projects or activities that interest them. Ideally, young people will find a project spark, learn new things about the topic, and grow in curiosity about it. Over time, they excel and develop mastery. Sometimes, this even leads to a career through their experience in the program.



To promote mastery, volunteers can encourage youth to take healthy risks and challenges, focusing on self-improvement. Volunteers can help create opportunities for mastery that are both challenging and age-appropriate. When those opportunities build on each other, it helps youth use and practice increasingly difficult skills and knowledge.

The Opportunity for Mastery is present when:

- Members grow in projects that capture their interest.
- Youth eventually assist or mentor others in the same interest area or skill.
- Youth demonstrate what they have learned and the skill they have developed.

Engagement in Learning

An engaged youth is one who is mindful of the subject area, building relationships and connections in order to develop understanding. The engaged learner has a higher degree of self-motivation and an inexhaustible capacity to create.

Engaged youth are self-motivated. They set learning goals and work to reach them. They think creatively. They focus on learning as a way of improving themselves (rather than competing with others).

Engagement is also about being excited about learning, especially learning by doing. Volunteers then reinforce that learning by asking the youth to reflect and apply what they have learned.

Volunteers, with the support of educators, develop activities that are age-appropriate and engaging. We provide hands-on and minds-on learning.

Engagement in Learning is present when:

- Members of various ages, backgrounds, and abilities do community service projects.
- Members work together, plan activities, and enjoy participating in learning activities.
- Members grow and mature as they plan and lead organizational activities and events.
- Members choose to become leaders of the group.

Generosity

Opportunity to Value and Practice Service to Others

Finding one's self begins with losing yourself in the service of others. Service is a way for members to gain exposure to the larger community, indeed the world itself.

Youth need to feel their lives have meaning and purpose. When youth participate in 4-H community service and civic engagement activities, they connect to the community. They learn to give back to others. They take steps toward finding their own purpose and meaning. Many studies have found evidence to support the theory that generosity even contributes to personal happiness.

Volunteers are encouraged to involve youth in all phases of service. The phases include identifying community needs, making decisions, evaluating, and sharing results. Participating throughout helps the youth understand the reasons behind the service activity. Their deeper understanding helps them develop life skills. A few of those skills might include compassion, empathy, and appreciation for diversity. Youth may also learn and practice problem solving, decision making, and communication skills.

The Element, Generosity, is present when:

- Youth joyfully serve others through community improvement projects.
- Youth show mutual support for others within the organization.
- Youth can identify community needs and design solutions to meet those needs.



Summary

Using the four Essential Elements together, 4-H professionals and volunteers are able to help youth develop into adults who will have positive impacts on their club, community, country and world!

Find additional training and resources about the Essential Elements on the 4-H website under Volunteer Resources at <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/4h-ext/>.