

Lesson 1: **Introducing 4-H Youth Development**

Youth development has been defined as *an ongoing process through which young people attempt to meet their needs and to develop the competencies they perceive as necessary for survival and transition to adulthood*. Positive Youth Development is *development that is positive and productive for both youth and their communities*.

Youth development refers to the development of the whole person and is not focused on a single attribute, skill, or characteristic, but rather the mastery of competencies needed for happy and productive adulthood. Positive youth development occurs from an intentional process that promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, choices, relationships, and the support necessary for youth to fully participate.

Youth development is the work of youth. Adults cannot do this work for them. But caring, knowledgeable and skilled adults can contribute to the success of young people as they grow and develop. Adults do this by providing environments for youth that are safe and nurturing and by expanding opportunities for experiences that will help young people develop skills they need for adulthood. Youth development professionals guide the community in providing these experiences.

In recent years, non-formal, out-of-school programs for youth have become recognized as key avenues for delivering these environments and opportunities. Universities and youth focused organizations have identified the research and knowledge base that supports effective programming for youth development as well as the effective principles and practices in delivering these programs. Course work leading toward a graduate degree in youth development is now available from several universities and university consortiums across the United States resulting in recognition of the need for preparation for participation in the field and providing support for professional staff development throughout the career cycle. A vocabulary to advocate for the work is in place.

4-H Youth Development is the non-formal, educational program for youth of the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It has gained a national reputation for its work with youth throughout the past century. 4-H is unique in the

non-formal youth development field because it is a partner with the land grant university system and has access to the most current knowledge and research provided by those universities related to youth development. In addition, 4-H staff and Cooperative Extension Offices are located in almost every county in the U.S. and are connected through an extensive electronic network that assures access to the most current developments from the field. This blending of research and field knowledge provides noteworthy support for the 4-H Youth Development Professional.¹

Agencies who have partnered with 4-H in recent years have cited the following strengths that 4-H brings to the partnership.

- 4-H is a nationally recognized effective youth development education program.
- Cooperative Extension/4-H has a strong local, county, state and national infrastructure and international support.
- Cooperative Extension/4-H outreach service opportunities support communities and community service efforts.
- Cooperative Extension/4-H research-based youth curriculum materials support the mission of other youth organizations.
- Cooperative Extension/4-H staff are youth development professionals trained in adult education and youth programming and are capable and accessible resources.
- Cooperative Extension/4-H has a record of successful partnerships with youth serving organizations including worldwide youth programs within the military.

1. Adapted and used with permission from Huebner, A. & McFarland, M. (2002) Youthworks Self-Study Guides: A Performance Based Training for Youth Development Professionals.

