

4-H takes on new challenges

Mention "4-H" and the first image that comes to mind is the familiar green clover, or youth in white and green togs showing livestock at a county fair.

With roots deep in our rich agricultural heritage, this University of California-sponsored program began 75 years ago with a core of traditional agricultural projects to build character in young people.

In recent years, 4-H has evolved well beyond the stereotype of youth raising crops and livestock, canning fruits and vegetables, or designing and sewing their own clothes. Newer activities in the list of more than 100 projects include photography, computer science, backpacking, even rocketry.

One of the more innovative activities is the "Ropes Course," an exhilarating experience

that sends participants scrambling through the redwoods of Sonoma County and similar areas in other counties to test their skills balancing on rope bridges, scaling sheer wooden walls, and negotiating suspended uneven bars. This mentally and physically challenging adventure seems far from activities normally associated with 4-H, but it shares the original goal of helping youth build self-confidence and a spirit of teamwork.

Diverse activities such as the Ropes Course keep 4-H dynamic and relevant to the interests, concerns, and needs of today's youth. Yet the basic mission of 4-H remains the same: to nurture self-esteem through its time-tested "learn-by-doing" approach.

What is different are the societal and personal challenges placed on youth today.

About 76,000 Californians from 9 to 19 years old are in 4-H programs today. More than 40% live in large cities or suburbs. About 55% are girls. They come from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and sociological backgrounds as diverse as the state itself. Minority membership has grown to 26,000 youth, more than one-third the statewide total.

The 4-H program is sponsored by the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Its specialists and advisors help 20,000-plus volunteer leaders design new programs and tap into the University's vast wealth of research-based knowledge. Examples abound:

- A case in point involves smokeless tobacco. Its use has increased at an alarming rate since the mid-1970s. As a 4-H specialist put it, smokeless is not just "a cowboy habit." Nearly half the adolescent boys polled in a recent statewide survey acknowledged "dippin' into the chaw" at least once. Even one in 10 girls admitted giving smokeless a try.

With a \$1.5 million grant from the National Cancer Institute, UC researchers embarked on a five-year project to curtail tobacco use. With the active involvement

The ever-popular livestock projects in 4-H now share the limelight with more than 100 other projects to help both urban and rural youth "learn by doing."

of 4-H'ers and their volunteer leaders, "Project 4-Health" set out to educate youth about the health hazards of tobacco.

- To meet another need, a 4-H pilot program in several counties gives youthful first-time offenders an alternative to chemical dependence. Youth are taught how to eliminate self-destructive behavior by cultivating latent skills and talents to build self-esteem.

- To help serve the needs of the 800,000 California children left alone each day, UC researchers developed the "4-H After-School Program." It helps provide alternatives for so-called "latchkey kids." Teaching packets help community leaders create safe activities that channel youthful energy more constructively.

- To equip youth with practical knowledge of their increasingly sophisticated world, another team of University researchers developed a program called Science Experiences and Resources for Informal Educational Settings (SERIES). Its purpose is to add a much-needed pragmatic dimension to science education.

The 4-H SERIES project will conduct a 36-month leadership and development project. The goal is to create the sort of "head- and hands-on" experiences in the realm of science and technology that has motivated 4-H for three-quarters of a century.

It is difficult to predict the challenges that will confront young Californians in the years ahead. But innovative programs such as these will help 4-H meet the needs of youth in the state's diverse society.

Few moments in life are as gratifying as watching a young face blossom with the joy of a positive experience, whether it is learning about a new life form, operating a new computer program, or winning first place at the county fair. Whatever the challenge, 4-H's "learn-by-doing" approach continues to help youth be better prepared to get, and give, the most in life.



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An innovative 4-H "Ropes" program challenges the mental and physical skills of participants and rewards them with a sense of self-confidence.