



# Helping You Help Youth



**BUILD CHARACTER**

## Why Build Character in Your 4-H Club?

In the 4-H pledge, members promise to use their head, heart, hands, and health in service to their club, community, country, and world. Leaders can help youth build character by teaching them character skills. These skills help 4-H members accomplish project and club goals and help them to become good citizens.

*“If we want our children to possess the traits of character we most admire, we need to teach them what those traits are and why they deserve both admiration and allegiance. Children must learn to identify the forms and content of those traits.”* – William J. Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education

## What is Character Building?

Character education is the intentional development of good character skills into every aspect of a child’s life, including 4-H. The Character Counts!<sup>sm</sup> Coalition focuses on trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. These six character traits are flexible enough to accommodate a variety of lifestyles and belief systems, while still making clear distinctions between right and wrong.

## Why is Character Building Important?

Much has been said about the need for character development in our youth. Cheating in schools, bullying, pervasive youth violence and other problems are well documented. Dr. Matt Davidson and Dr. Thomas Lickona, authors of *Smart and Good High Schools*, conducted a two-year study of 24 award-winning high schools in the nation. Their 2006 findings stress that we must develop not only moral character, but performance character in our youth. We also

know that to gain maximum benefit, we must impact not only an individual, but their social environment. The presence of a “caring community” is a necessary component to “help others to do their best work.” To build positive virtues in young people, a caring and involved community is essential. 4-H is part of that community.

Character Education Partnership and The Character Counts!<sup>sm</sup> Coalition recommend that a community come to consensus about the character traits they feel are most important. When an entire community identifies specific traits, it becomes a cooperative effort. Thus, involvement of the faith community, youth groups, civic groups, law enforcement personnel, parents, schools, social service representatives, business leaders, civic leaders and the local media is necessary for a comprehensive community approach to character education.

## How Can 4-H Volunteers Help Youth Build Character?

4-H is known for developing life skills through hands-on activities. Good character is an important life skill for 4-H members to develop. Suggestions for volunteers follow:

- Reflect upon several character traits and evaluate your own. Recognize that 4-H volunteers are role models and significantly impact the lives of 4-H youth. Research identifies the importance of adults in developing positive, healthy youth.
- Involve the club in meaningful community service. When youth believe they can make a difference in their community, they continue to do so as adults. Begin the 4-H year by identifying community service activities.
- Encourage 4-H members to select projects of interest. Through the 4-H program, youth can learn the importance of identifying a project, keeping records, working toward their project

goals, and preparing for their final exhibit. This gives youth the experience of ethical decision-making, caring, and responsibility.

- Foster teamwork within the club. Create opportunities during club meetings, community service projects, fun activities, and project workdays that encourage members to include and rely on one another. Research identifies that youth will grow socially and emotionally when their surroundings are safe, caring, and include a highly participatory learning environment.

*“A teacher affects all eternity. We are all teachers.” – Henry Adams*

### Building a Character T.E.A.M.

The African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child” comes to mind as we think of a whole community **T**eaching, **E**nforcing, **A**dvocating, and **M**odeling good character to young people. Think of the **T.E.A.M.** approach, created by the Josephson Institute, as you actively help youth to become people of character.

**Teach:** Teach 4-H members that their character counts and their success and happiness may be intertwined with good character traits. Explain the meaning of the words in the Character Building Skills wheel shown later. Use examples related not only to 4-H work but from your own life, history, the news, movies, etc.

**Enforce:** Look for and reward good behavior and discourage instances of poor behavior. Consequences should be decided early on when establishing meeting rules. It is a good idea to include 4-H members in setting these rules.

**Advocate:** Encourage 4-H members to exhibit good character traits. Be clear that you want and expect 4-H members to be trustworthy, respectful, responsible, fair, caring, good citizens, and good decision-makers.

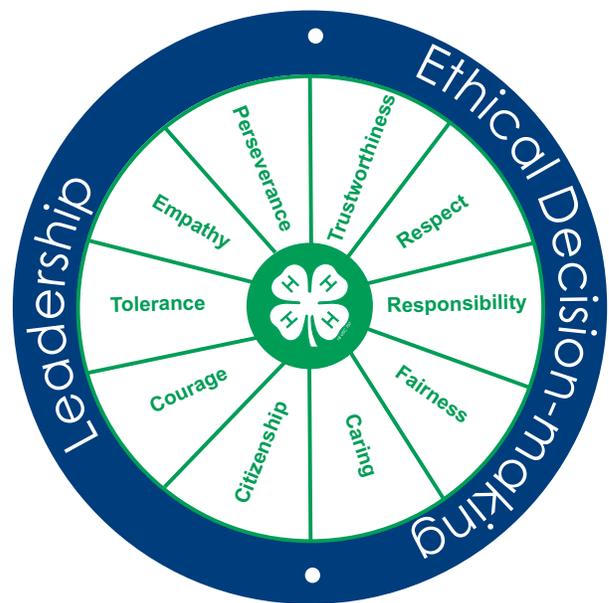
**Model:** Set a good example in what you say and do. Be sure everything you do and don’t do sends a message about doing the right thing even when it is difficult. When you make a mistake, act the way you want 4-H members to behave when they have acted improperly. Be accountable, apologize sincerely, and resolve to do better.

### The 3 C’s Incorporate T.E.A.M. into Your Club

**Be Consistent:** The character messages you send must be clear, consistent, and repetitive. Your messages will have greater impact on 4-H members if you always do what you say. They will judge your sincerity not only by what you say and do, but also by what you *permit* them to do.

**Be Concrete:** Messages about building good character skills should be specific, direct, and relevant to the lives and experiences of 4-H members. Discuss real life examples of choices and consequences that members can relate to their own lives.

**Be Creative:** Use a variety of methods to develop good character skills in club members. Actively involve members in actual decision-making that has real consequences. Games and role-playing are also effective. Use good and bad examples from current events in the media, 4-H experiences, or school activities as “teachable moments.”



Character Building Skills

Look for ideas to develop the individual skills, bolded in the sections that follow.

## How to Include Character Building in Your Club/Group

The 4-H experience provides a training ground to produce involved, caring citizens in our communities. Recognize positive actions that you observe in the group, provide gentle suggestions on how to improve, suggest helpful examples that youth can implement and encourage youth to support one another. Implement the following examples in the club to develop and strengthen character skills.

- Trust older members to fulfill their **leadership** roles; praise them as they exhibit **trustworthiness**.
- Discuss how **trustworthiness** is expected from 4-H members at all times. This includes fair exhibits, conference judging, award submissions, and completion of tasks or roles within the club.
- Encourage members to model **responsible** and **respectful** behavior by arriving on time for meetings, including all members in club activities, and doing what they say they are going to do for club meetings.
- Teach **responsibility** by encouraging youth to make motions, take part in discussions, and vote on all business of the group.
- Teach **caring** and **responsibility** by encouraging youth to enroll in livestock and small animal projects. Encourage members to share experiences during meetings.
- Build **responsibility** and confidence in members by reinforcing the importance of completing project work. Completion also promotes **perseverance** and diligence in finishing tasks.
- Encourage members to identify a personal “**responsibility** challenge”. They choose a household chore for which they are responsible for one month and report at the next meeting.
- Emphasize information about 4-H deadlines and dates. Forms may be initially overwhelming regarding livestock ownership and identification, events, activities, etc. A friendly reminder of due dates will encourage **responsibility** in completion of requirements.
- Practice **fairness** by sharing group tasks and responsibilities among the members. Members should take turns with refreshments, games, ice breakers, show and tell, project displays and demonstrations, talks, etc. Provide a sign-up sheet at the first meeting and explain that all will share in club duties. You may wish to pair youth to ensure that no family experiences a financial hardship. Also, the club can choose an older member to make reminder calls to members to honor their commitments.
- Welcome and mentor new or younger members. Creating a **caring**, welcoming club environment promotes positive youth development.
- Practice **caring** with a roll call activity. Members can share ways to show someone that they care.
- Encourage members to recognize and acknowledge each others’ achievements throughout the year. These **caring** actions mean a lot to the recipient and the giver, and build self-esteem in both.
- Support members in roles of committee members or officers. They may be unsure at first and can benefit from the assistance of a **caring** leader or junior leader. Provide officer training using materials obtained at the local Extension office.
- Use parliamentary procedure to teach **citizenship** and **leadership** skills through club voting and orderly meetings.
- Develop **leadership** skills by teaching youth to evaluate, determine quality, and make and defend decisions with reasons during judging contests.
- Create junior leader roles to help youth develop **leadership** skills. Youth leaders could teach a group project or plan and conduct an event.
- Encourage members to exhibit **leadership** by giving talks or demonstrations. Suggest that experienced members give the first talks or demonstrations of the year; thereby role-modeling and preparing newer members to succeed.

## What are Character Building Group 4-H Projects?

- *4-H Focus on Character* is a set of eight meeting plans with character building activities that are to be led by the older members of your club. The goals are that the members will be able to list and explain the Six Pillars of Character<sup>sm</sup> and make decisions based on these pillars in 4-H meetings, project work, and activities. Adult and youth leaders will help members see connections between the activities and other parts of their life, and by others modeling and reinforcing the character traits.
- *Walk in My Shoes* teaches **empathy** for others while providing a community service. Visits with older people can develop **respect** and **tolerance** for another generation, their heritage, and history.
- *Passport to the World and Cultural Connections* create intercultural experiences for 4-H members that teach **respect** and **tolerance** for people from other cultures. Exposing 4-H members to the diversity in the world is an excellent way to increase knowledge and understanding of other cultures and decrease ignorance that leads to misunderstanding and misperception.
- Borrow a culture kit or take a club field trip to an ethnic museum or restaurant.
- Participate in the 4-H exchange program. A visiting exchange student can bring invaluable insight on diversity to a club meeting.
- 4-H **Citizenship** and community service can help youth brainstorm local needs and what they can do to assist. Provide opportunities for community service with activities such as recycling, park clean up, greeting cards for veterans, shoveling snow for the elderly, helping youth organize a food, clothing, or school supply drive, aiding a local humane society, and assisting victims of natural disasters.

- 4-H **Leadership** projects help members develop such skills as **decision-making**, teamwork, communication, **tolerance**, and conflict resolution.

## Summary

Building character should be integrated into every aspect of a person's life – home, school, work, and community. If 4-H youth are expected to exhibit good character traits, adults, volunteers need to teach them what those traits are, why they are important, and provide opportunities for them to practice and experience character building activities. Once youth have had a positive experience, they will be more confident and eager to plan future events. 4-H club participation is an important avenue to character building.

## References

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CHARACTER COUNTS!<sup>sm</sup> and the Six Pillars of Character are service marks of the Josephson Institute. [www.charactercounts.org](http://www.charactercounts.org).

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University of Illinois Extension Character Development Web Site <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/character/>

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