



4-H VOLUNTEER TRAINING SERIES

The ABCs of 4-H: A Primer for 4-H Volunteers¹

Welcome to the 4-H Team

4-H is the world's largest positive youth development organization. Our programs are based on the science of positive youth development to provide a rich context for youth to develop positive relationships that express care, challenge growth, and share power. These components ensure that our programs are a place where youth can belong and learn about their sparks. Youth engaged in 4-H are four times more likely to give back to their communities, two times more likely to make healthy choices, and two times more likely to participate in science-related activities (Lerner et al., 2013).

Volunteers are essential to the successful implementation of the 4-H program sharing unique talents, skills, knowledge, and experience to provide personalized attention to youth.

As a 4-H volunteer, you represent Florida 4-H of UF/IFAS Extension and FAMU Extension, which together make up the Florida Cooperative Extension Service.

Introduction

This is one publication in the [4-H Volunteer Training Series](#). This EDIS series prepares 4-H volunteers to apply positive youth development best practices.

This publication will cover the 4-H history and structure, culture, membership guidelines, and volunteer opportunities.

4-H History and Structure

A Brief History of 4-H

4-H clubs were preceded by corn clubs for boys and canning clubs for girls, organized in the early 1900s by public school educators who wanted to broaden the knowledge and experience of their students. Florida 4-H began in 1909. Along with agriculture and home economics, 4-H became an official part of the Cooperative Extension Service at about the time Cooperative Extension was officially established by the US Congress in 1914. The term "4-H Club" first appeared in a federal document in 1918, and by the mid-1920s, 4-H was well on its way to becoming a significant national program for youth. 4-H is an American idea that has spread around the world. Throughout its long history, 4-H has constantly adapted to the ever-changing needs and interests of youth. To gain insight into the foundational origins of 4-H, we invite you to watch the [Brief History of 4-H](#). For a comprehensive understanding of the historical development of Florida 4-H, watch the [History of Florida 4-H](#).

Florida 4-H Structure

At the local level, 4-H is available in all 67 counties and the Seminole Tribes. The county program is developed around each county's unique needs, and several counties form a 4-H district. Florida 4-H is administered jointly by the University of Florida (UF), in partnership with Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), the state's land-grant institutions. They have three functions: academics, research, and Extension. Extension helps connect citizens with research to

¹This document is 4H335, one of a series of the 4-H Youth Development Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date July 2014. Revised July 2018 and September 2024. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

Written by Keith G. Diem and Sarah Hensley. Revised by Candi Dierenfield, Shreemoyee Ghosh, Jessica Emerson, Paula Davis, Nicole Crawson, Bailea Scarborough, and David Hafner.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.

improve their lives and communities. 4-H is the youth outreach component of Extension.

The 4-H Organizational Structure/Chain of Command

- 4-H volunteer
- 4-H faculty
- County Extension director
- District Extension director
- Associate state 4-H program leader
- Associate dean for Extension & state program leader for 4-H Youth Development, Families and Communities
- Dean of Extension

How Florida 4-H Is Funded

Florida 4-H receives funds from a cooperative partnership of three levels of government—federal (via the National Institute of Food & Agriculture of the U.S. Department of Agriculture), state (via UF/IFAS Extension and FAMU), and county. 4-H also receives support from private sources, including the Florida 4-H Foundation.

4-H Culture

Our Mission, Vision, and Values

The Florida 4-H Youth Development Program uses a learn-by-doing approach along with caring adults to help youth gain the knowledge and life skills they need to be productive, responsible citizens through mission mandates of **Agriculture, STEM, Civic Engagement, and Healthy Living**. To achieve its mission, 4-H uses the expertise and resources of UF/IFAS, FAMU, and a nationwide network of Cooperative Extension Service faculty, staff, and screened volunteers.

Our vision is to be the leading youth development program that creates positive change in youth, families, and communities.

Our Values:

- 4-H values the principles of positive youth development, experiential learning, and the importance of having fun while learning!
- 4-H encourages family involvement and support by connecting families to their communities and to one another.
- 4-H promotes the development of skills that help young people succeed in a rapidly changing world.
- 4-H creates opportunities for youth to have a voice in the development and evaluation of the program at the local, state, and national level.
- 4-H is committed to achieving a community of faculty, staff, volunteers, and program participants that reflects the diversity of the state of Florida.

4-H Values Inclusion and Diversity

4-H aims to meet the needs and interests of a wide variety of youth. 4-H is the youth development program of the Cooperative Extension Service, a nationwide partnership of federal, state, and county governments, as well as the private sector. UF/IFAS Extension Florida 4-H Youth Development programs are offered to all youth ages 5–18 on an age-appropriate basis, without regard to race, creed, color, religion, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, or political opinions or affiliations.

4-H Emblem

The emblem is a four-leaf clover with a capital H in each leaf, standing for Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. The 4-H Name & Emblem belong to the 4-H Youth Development Program, under the authority of the USDA. Contact your local UF/IFAS Extension 4-H agent to obtain permission prior to use.

Uniforms and Dues

Uniforms are not required for membership in 4-H or for participation in 4-H activities. Clubs will often order matching shirts for events and activities, or you can purchase premade items from the 4-H mall or UF/IFAS Bookstore. Fairs and shows may require exhibitors to wear special clothing or safety equipment. Refer to

event rules or check with your local UF/IFAS Extension 4-H agent.

The Florida 4-H Youth Development Program requires an annual membership fee for 4-H youth members ages 8–18. Youth will not be considered active 4-H members if the fee has not been paid. Fees are collected on an annual basis each 4-H program year (from September 1st to August 31st). Annual membership fees are due at the time of enrollment/re-enrollment. Membership scholarships may be available on a case-by-case basis.

Some counties and clubs may decide to collect additional money from members to cover the costs of club activities. These costs cover minor expenses throughout the year such as refreshments, club t-shirts, or other items.

4-H Colors, Pledge, Motto, and Slogan



Figure 1. This graphic image highlights several 4-H basics including the 4-H emblem, pledge, colors, symbolisms, mottos, and slogan.

Credit: Paula Davis, UF/IFAS

How 4-H Reaches Youth

4-H offers youth ages 5–18 a nurturing environment with caring adults to encourage a sense of belonging that enables them to explore their spark by fostering developmental relationships through

- organized 4-H community clubs.
- 4-H school-based programs; 4-H in-school and after-school programs and clubs.
- 4-H special interest/short-term programs.
- 4-H day and residential camping.
- 4-H individual study/mentoring/family-learning programs.
- 4-H military club.
- 4-H instructional TV/video/virtual programs.

Methods Used

4-H uses a variety of methods to engage youth in learning, such as:

- **Experiential learning**
- Youth-adult partnerships
- Research-based curriculum materials
- Projects
 - Florida 4-H **project materials**
 - National 4-H project materials can be purchased from [Shop 4-H](#).
 - Consult your local UF/IFAS Extension 4-H agent for information about curriculum materials.
 - There are more than 50 different project areas for youth to select
 - Projects are planned work, typically a minimum of six hours, in an area of interest, guided by screened 4-H adult volunteers, aimed at planned objectives that can be attained and measured, and summarized by some form of record keeping.
- Activities such as public speaking, judging contests, field trips, demonstrations
- Service learning that encompasses the process of identifying a problem, devising a solution, and assessing its impact

- Community service that typically entails a single, one-time contribution to the community
- Collaborations with other youth-serving agencies and organizations

Membership Guidelines

4-H Ages and the 4-H Program Year

The 4-H program year begins on September 1st and ends on August 31st. 4-H is open to all youth ages 5–18 as of September 1st of the current 4-H program year.

Competition and Age Appropriateness

4-H uses a learn-by-doing approach to teach subject matter and life skills. Although competitive events are one means to do this, competition in 4-H needs to be balanced with fun and learning. Therefore, both competitive and non-competitive educational programs and events are offered by 4-H. Even competitive 4-H events should strive to include fun, non-competitive activities for participants and others attending.

4-H programs and activities are offered on an age-appropriate basis that considers the mental and physical readiness of youth, availability of suitable curriculum materials, adequate supervision, and the health and safety of participants.

Regular membership ages 8–18 are eligible for competitive events, while ages 5–7 in the 4-H Cloverbud program explore learning together and are limited to participation in non-competitive activities. If Cloverbuds are part of a competitive event involving older youth, they should not be judged and will receive only recognition. Refer to EDIS publication #4H369, “4-H Cloverbuds: 4-H for Younger Members.”

Policies

For information about 4-H policies and guidelines, refer to the [Florida 4-H Policies & Best Management Practices](#).

Becoming a 4-H Volunteer

4-H has a responsibility to provide a safe and healthy environment for youth. **All 4-H volunteers, appointed by the UF/IFAS Extension county 4-H agent, undergo an online application and screening procedure. Volunteers who engage with youth for over 10 hours a month having Care, Custody, and Control—including overnight chaperones—must complete a Level 2 background screening through 4-H Online and an annual 4-H Youth Protection Training.**

Once all requirements are met, volunteers are officially appointed by the county 4-H agent. Every new volunteer receives comprehensive orientation, covering Extension, 4-H, and their specific responsibilities. For more information about volunteering for 4-H, please visit <https://florida4h.ifas.ufl.edu/get-involved/>.

Volunteers who commit less than 10 hours a month and do not have caregiving responsibilities will complete a Level 1 background screening through the county office, in addition to the 4-H Youth Protection Training. Refer to EDIS publication #4H444, “UF/IFAS Extension Florida 4-H Youth Protection Policy” for more information.

4-H Volunteer Roles

There are many ways in which you can serve as an adult volunteer based on your time, interests, and abilities:

- Club leader
- Resource person
- Judge
- Member of the County 4-H Association
- Key leader for a project area or special event

For more information about 4-H volunteer positions, speak with your local UF/IFAS Extension 4-H agent.

Club Volunteer

- Club activity leader
- Club assistant
- Club organizational leader

- Club project leader
- Club resource leader
- Mentor to independent youth

Project Volunteer

- County project leader
- Shooting sports volunteer

Activity Volunteer

- County activity leader
- Episodic volunteer

Program Volunteer

- Association/foundation member
- Florida 4-H agents
- Florida 4-H staff
- Florida youth naturalist
- Group committee member/resource leader
- Master Gardener
- States' 4-H International Exchange

What's Next...

Now that you have learned about the 4-H history and structure, 4-H culture, membership guidelines, and volunteer opportunities, the next step is to learn [how to start a 4-H club](#).

For more information about 4-H, go to the [Florida 4-H website](#), refer to other EDIS publications in the [4-H Volunteer Training Series](#), or contact your local UF/IFAS Extension 4-H office.

See also the [4-H Volunteer Training Resources](#) documents located at the Florida 4-H website.

Reference

Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., et al. (2013). *The positive development of youth: Comprehensive findings from the 4-H study of positive youth development*. Tufts University. <https://4-h.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/26143548/4-H-Study-of-Positive-Youth-Development-Full-Report.pdf>

Resources

4-H Volunteer Training EDIS Series: https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/collections/series_vts

History of 4-H: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaRiYB_AxGA

History of Florida 4-H: <https://florida4h.ifas.ufl.edu/about-us/florida-4-h-history/>

Florida 4-H, Get Involved—Volunteers: <https://florida4h.ifas.ufl.edu/get-involved/>

EDIS publication #4HSFS101.1, “Using an Experiential Model in 4-H,” on Experiential Learning: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/4H243>

Florida 4-H projects: <https://florida4h.ifas.ufl.edu/projects/>

Shop 4-H: <https://shop4-h.org/>

Florida 4-H Policies & Best Management Practices: <https://florida4h.ifas.ufl.edu/media/florida4hifasufledu/docs/Florida-4-H-Policies-Updated-11.01.23--Copy.pdf>

EDIS publication #4H336, “4-H Volunteer Training Series: How to Start a 4-H Club (for Youth Ages 5–18)”: <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/4H336>

Publication History

Diem, K. G. (2005). *The ABCs of 4-H: A primer for 4-H volunteers*. Clemson Extension/South Carolina 4-H. 4-H Leader Training Series.