

Update: Preliminary Results

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Resilience Research Project: sport for positive youth development through rural and resilience lenses.

Description: In the midst of the physical (obesity) and mental health crisis in Canada resulting in low international rankings for child and youth wellbeing, rural residency is considered a socio-economic determinant of even lower wellbeing. Youth in rural areas face greater challenges to healthy development, and need support which is appropriate to the rural community context.

4-H is the leading youth development organization focused on programs for rural youth for over 100 years. Many 4-H members have gone on to be leaders in their communities or industry. We sometimes forget that the biggest impact youth development programs can have is on the ‘non-star’ kids: the kids whose family circumstances can’t provide advantages, or who may not be among the few that go on to run companies or large farms; the kids that might otherwise fall through the cracks. As a low-cost, grassroots activity, 4-H clubs help kids from all socio-economic groups develop skills and confidence. It’s hard to appreciate the value of the ‘cost that didn’t happen’, but activity that encourages all kids to discover their strengths, engage in learning, and have goals for adult life saves society money in social and health care costs, while contributing another positive community member with the work ethic and civic-mindedness that has built our country.

Despite this good work, 4-H’s funding is not guaranteed, and there is a growing rural population that could benefit from more access. To attract and retain funding for these important programs, the positive benefits need to go beyond nice stories about wonderful individuals. While we know that kids enjoy their 4-H experience, it’s not always clear what parts of the program are having the most impact on the knowledge, leadership and social skills at the core of the 4-H purpose. Research helps turn the tacit knowledge of volunteers and members with direct experience, into shareable information that can explain what works so it can be repeated and improved, and encourage funders and other stakeholders.

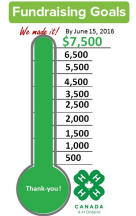
Why only horse club research? 4-H Ontario horse clubs are one of the top ten most popular club topics, providing an activity option that has a lot of appeal for some youth (especially girls), keeping them physically active. Physical activity levels for rural youth and girls are currently a major Public Health concern. 4-H horse club also brings youth into contact with the farm experience and the 4-H community, whether their family lives on a farm or not, or has had any prior 4-H experience. Where there are horses, they come. And then they get drawn into the greater 4-H community and even more opportunities.

Also, through the popularity of horse activity as therapy or experiential learning, we know that work with horses can be beneficial for teaching leadership and other skills, especially for kids that face different challenges- if it’s done a certain way. Equestrian- or any sport- doesn’t necessarily teach those skills. We suspected that there was a ‘4-H difference’. The goal of the research study was to get grassroots participants to share what they know about how the club experience helps grow resilient kids that are better prepared for the challenges of adult life. Although the study included only 4-H horse clubs, the results can be applied to many other 4-H, animal-activity and youth leadership programs. The study obtained important feedback about:

- ✓ barriers and motivations for member participants and volunteer leaders
- ✓ understanding who club members are and what they value
- ✓ what resilience looks like in a 4-H member, and how a club helps make it happen

The project had three phases: an online survey that went to 400 club members and leaders, interviews with individual club leaders, and group photo-interviews with club members that gave them a chance to show off their work, share their ideas and practice public speaking. There were 81 surveys collected, with 70 completed, and about 15hrs of interview time (10 leaders, 30 youth). Participants also submitted photos, video and items or drawings. From a research point of view, people participating in the study were awesome: there was a lot of good information. Participation from across the Province makes the findings a reliable representation of how youth in 4-H develop resilience and other life skills.

Money: The budget for this project came from a partnership between 4-H, the University of Guelph and the research student, and Mitacs, a research funder. Mitacs matches the partner (4-H) dollar-to-dollar for a set amount. The University administers the program, and agrees with the researcher that the researcher also give back to 4-H in the form of internship time. This project was funded 50% by Mitacs, 25% by 4-H Ontario, and 25% by crowd-sourcing by the researcher. More information is at: <http://www.heathersansom.ca/support-resilience-research.html>



Visual Data: 4-H horse club means

Fast facts: Participants ranged from 10-72! The average for youth was 14yrs. Volunteer leaders spanned 5 decades, averaging 44yrs. Although 92% of participants were girls, horse activity appealed to both boys and girls. Boys were more present where there was a male (leader or parent) involved. The high percentage of girls is extremely significant, since the general trend is for girls to drop out of physical activity, especially in rural areas, with negative life-time health & wellbeing consequences. The sport and health fields are trying to increase physical activity among girls and rural youth.

Inclusion: Boys and girls, and members with different physical & learning challenges all appear to be able to participate in horse activity with equal benefit and enjoyment, when leaders adapt activities to club members, and prioritize the 4-H emphasis on growing as a person and being included in a community, (rather than high technical skill as first priority).

Achievement: Don't be fooled: everyone-gets-a-ribbon doesn't squash drive & initiative. They come for the horses, but get more: they're challenged (and supported) to be better. Many members are empowered by their 4-H horse experience to participate in horse or other sports/physical activities outside of 4-H, get involved in their community, show work ethic at school and reach for professional and personal goals well matched to their strengths, and sometimes despite less positive trends among the general population sharing their socio-economic circumstances or psycho-social or physical challenges.

Leadership



Working Together



Nurturing Relationships



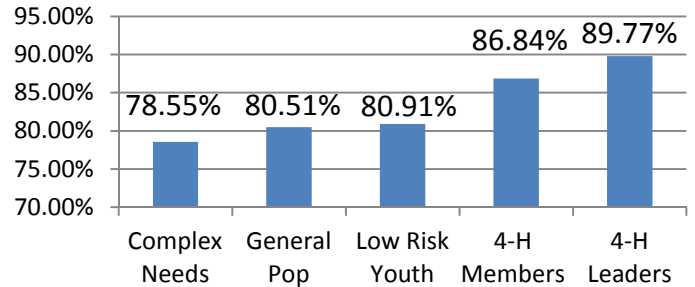
Learning



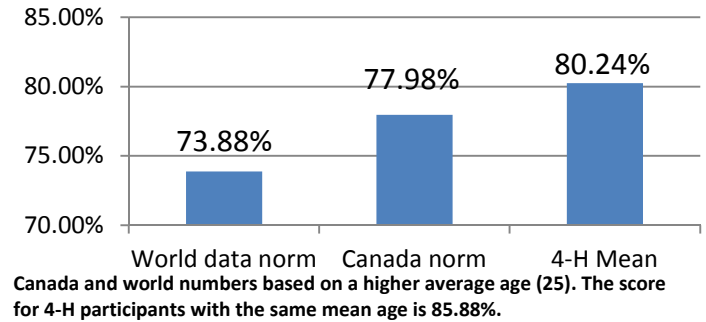
I can Shine



Resilience Score Comparison to General Population



Self-Efficacy Score Comparison



What They Said About 4-H:

What's Best: Members

1. Learning experience
2. Access to horses
3. The people (adults & peers)
4. Hands-on
5. Being outdoors/on a farm

What's Best: Leaders

1. Learning experiences
2. Personal skill development
3. Leadership opportunity
4. Program structure
5. Opportunity to engage

What Could Improve

1. More a time with horses
 2. More members /volunteers (Basically more kids having more access to horses and more volunteers to help make it happen for all income brackets)
 3. More diverse challenge experiences (cattle have many, horse clubs have few)
 4. More support to help leaders connect with knowledge that is out there, and peers
- All comments for more resources ('more money') related to the above goals.

Learn To Do By Doing: While I was out there visiting, interviewing and volunteering in the field, I felt like I was getting a glimpse of something I wished I'd known as a kid. I wish more kids could know. As I 'learned to do by doing' (my research project), I learned from 4-H folks. I also got some true 4-H experiences: public speaking, being part of my own fundraising, going on a 4-H cultural exchange (visits in Sweden). I don't think my life will be the same. The 4-H pledge is not just a saying; it's a way of being. I'm hoping to join as a volunteer horse club leader when the research is done.

