



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
**EXTENSION**

**Minnesota 4-H Retention Study Brief**

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While the Minnesota 4-H Club program has been growing over the last six years, over 25% of youth tracked through the state's individual enrollment database, 4-HPlus, do not re-enroll annually. Wanting to know how 4-H could improve its member retention rate, the Minnesota 4-H Retention Study asked 4-H members who left the program why they decided to join, stay and ultimately leave 4-H.

A team of educators from Minnesota and Wisconsin Extension joined efforts to design a survey containing questions based on youth participation data, retention research and staff observations. In addition to asking why youth joined, stayed, and left 4-H, questions were asked related to club and project meeting experiences, participation in 4-H activities (club, county and beyond), and participation in activities outside of 4-H, both during and after 4-H membership.

Two waves of surveys have been completed. The first survey, conducted in the summer 2008, was sent to youth who were members in 2006-2007 4-H program year but did not re-enroll in 2007. This survey was completed by 90 Minnesota youth who finished grades one through one year past high school.

The second survey went through minor revisions and was sent to a new Minnesota sample on February 1, 2009. Young people who were members in 2007-2008 but did not re-enroll in 2008 and had an e-mail address were the recipients of the request to complete the survey; approximately 3,000 youth were asked to participate in the survey. This report summarizes only the responses provided by 220 youth in the second survey sample.

### **Reasons Youth Joined 4-H**

Responders were asked to select all of the reasons they joined 4-H from a list provided to them. Most youth indicated they originally joined 4-H because they wanted to have fun (91%), try new things (86%), participate in projects and fairs (80%), and their parent/guardian signed them up for 4-H (73%). Less common responses were joining because friends were in 4-H (42%) and wanting to teach others (38%). Of the 21 “Other” responses given, most common reasons youth joined were to work with animals and because other family members were in the 4-H program.

**GRAPH 1 – Reasons Youth Joined 4-H**

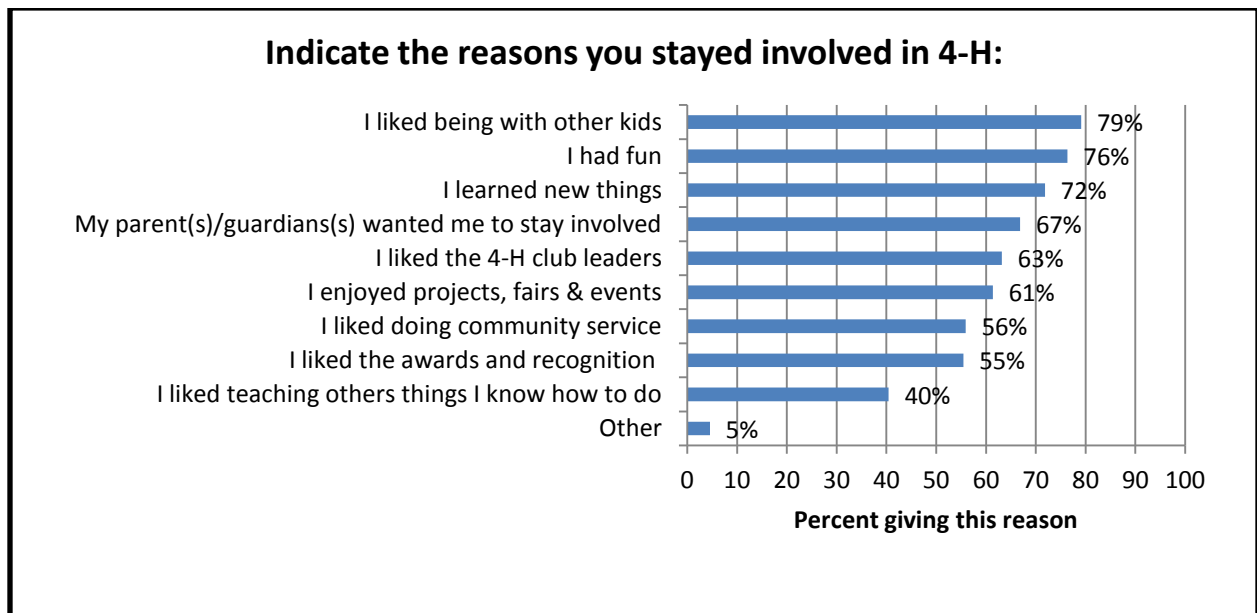


The research showed that girls were more likely than boys to join 4-H to try new things, while boys were more likely to have joined 4-H because parents signed them up. Youth in sixth grade and over were less likely to have joined 4-H because parents signed them up than younger responders.

### **Why Youth Stayed in 4-H**

Based on 4-H enrollment data, the average length of 4-H membership for the responders was 3.3 years. When asked to select all reasons they stayed in 4-H, the following were primary reasons youth participants stayed as long as they did: Liked being with other kids (79%), had fun (76%), learned new things (72%), and parents wanted them to stay involved (67%). Liking the 4-H club leaders (63%), working on projects and participating in fairs and events (61%), community service projects (56%), awards and recognition (55%), and teaching others (40%) were less significant factors contributing to youth deciding to stay in 4-H. Most common of the 10 “Other” responses were activities, meeting others, and the fair.

**GRAPH 2 – Why Youth Stayed in 4-H**

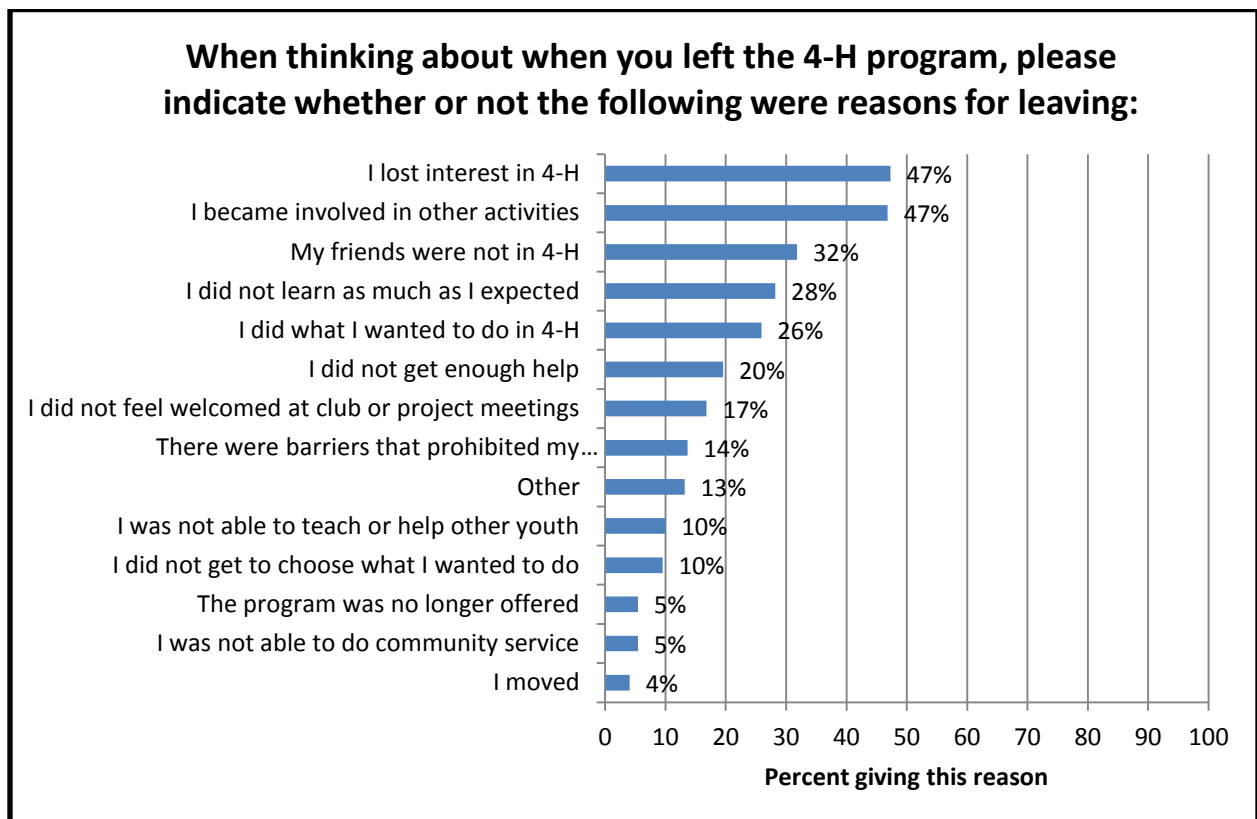


When comparing significant relationships between grades and reasons youth stayed in 4-H, young people in sixth-eighth grade were far less likely to have stayed in 4-H than youth in fifth grade and under or ninth grade and above because they liked their 4-H club leaders. There was no difference between boys and girls.

### **Reasons Youth Left the 4-H Program**

Youth were given a list and asked to select all of the reasons they left 4-H. The primary reasons youth left the 4-H program in 2008 were because they lost interest in 4-H (47%) or became involved in other activities (47%). Secondary reasons included friends were not in 4-H (31%), did not learn as much as expected (28%), or they did what they wanted to do in 4-H (26%). Still fewer youth reported they did not get enough help in 4-H (20%), did not feel welcomed (17%), were prohibited by barriers (14%), were not able to help others (10%), did not get to make choices (10%) or participate in community service (5%). In a few cases the program was no longer offered (5%) or the youth moved (4%). Twenty-nine youth provided “Other” responses, with poor meeting environment and busy schedule being the most common responses.

**GRAPH 3 – Reasons Youth Left the 4-H Program**



The study showed that youth in ninth grade and over were less likely than eighth grade and under to leave 4-H because they were not getting enough help. No significant relationship between reasons for leaving and gender was found.

### **Examining Reasons Youth Joined 4-H Compared to Reasons They Left the Program**

When looking at why youth joined 4-H compared to why they chose not to re-enroll in 4-H, the two were not related in general. Notable exceptions that were statistically significant included the following:

- Most youth that came into the organization wanting to do community service were able to serve their community (89%). Youth who joined because they wanted to participate in community service activities were less likely to leave 4-H because their friends were not in 4-H compared to youth who joined for other reasons (36% vs. 53%).
- The majority of 4-H'ers who first joined the program because they wanted to teach or help others were able to do that (77%).
- When youth joined because their friends were 4-H members, they were more likely to leave because they became involved with other activities than youth who joined for other reasons (77% vs. 47%).
- Youth who joined because they wanted to participate in 4-H activities like projects and fairs were more likely to leave 4-H because they did not learn as much as expected compared to youth who joined for other reasons (41% vs. 20%).

### **Reasons Youth Stayed in 4-H Compared to Reasons Youth Left the Program**

Over 90 possible relationships were examined between the reasons for staying in 4-H and the reasons for leaving 4-H. All youth were asked both about their reasons for why they stayed with 4-H while they did and about their reasons for leaving the program. Not all were deemed significant; however, some significant relationships were found and they are as follows.

- When youth indicated they stayed in 4-H because they had fun, they were less likely than other youth to leave because
  - Their friends weren't in 4-H (35% vs. 56%),
  - They didn't feel welcomed at club meetings (16% vs. 52%),
  - They didn't get enough help (20% vs. 44%), or
  - They lost interest in 4-H (56% vs. 77%).
- Youth that stayed because they learned new things were far less likely than other youth to leave because they did not
  - Feel welcomed at club meetings (18% vs. 35%),
  - Get enough help (20% vs. 42%), or
  - Get to choose what to do (9% vs. 24%).
- If youth stayed in 4-H because they enjoyed working on projects and participating in fairs and events, they were
  - Less likely to leave than youth who stayed for other reasons because they
    - didn't get enough help (19% vs. 37%) or
    - had no choice in what to do (7% vs. 25%).
  - More likely to leave than youth who stayed for other reasons because they did what they wanted to do in 4-H (41% vs. 23%).
- When youth stayed in 4-H because they liked teaching others things they know how to do, they were
  - Less likely to leave than other youth because they lost interest in 4-H (44% vs. 72%).
  - More likely than others to leave because they
    - Were not able to teach others (20% vs. 9%), or
    - Did what wanted to do (43% vs. 27%).

- If 4-H members stayed because they liked their 4-H leader(s), they were less likely to leave because they
  - Didn't feel welcomed (13% vs. 46%),
  - Didn't learn as much as expected (32% vs. 58%), or
  - Didn't get enough help (19% vs. 41%).

As indicated in Tables 1 and 2, two reasons youth left 4-H seemed to have a more significant relationship with reasons youth stayed in 4-H. Youth who left 4-H either because they didn't get enough help or lost interest had different and more significant reasons for staying in 4-H for as long as they did. Youth were less likely to have left 4-H because they did not get enough help if they stayed because they had fun, learned new things, liked the club leaders, enjoyed working on projects and participating in fairs, and like awards and recognition.

**TABLE 1 – Youth Who Left 4-H Because They Didn't Get Enough Help but Stayed for Significant Reasons**

<b>Relationship Between Reason for Staying in 4-H and Leaving 4-H Because Youth Did Not Get Enough Help</b>			
<b>Reason youth stayed in 4-H</b>	<b>% youth who stayed in 4-H for this reason</b>	<b>% youth who stayed for this reason but left because they didn't get enough help in 4-H</b>	<b>% youth who stayed for other reasons but left because they didn't get enough help in 4-H</b>
I had fun	76%	20%	44%
I learned new things	72%	20%	42%
I liked the club leaders	63%	19%	41%
I enjoyed working on projects and participating in fairs	61%	19%	37%
I liked the awards and recognition I achieved and worked toward	55%	19%	33%

Youth who stayed in 4-H because they had fun and learned new things, took part in projects, fairs and community service, and were able to teach others were less likely to have left because they lost interest.

When further analyzing youth who left 4-H because they lost interest, a significant relationship was found with those who also left because friends were not in 4-H, they were not welcomed, they did not learn, did not get to make choices or were in other activities.

**TABLE 2 – Youth Who Left 4-H Because They Lost Interest but Stayed for Significant Reasons**

<b>Relationship between Reason for Staying in 4-H and Leaving 4-H because Youth Lost Interest in 4-H</b>			
Reason youth stayed in 4-H	% youth who stayed in 4-H for this reason	% youth who stayed for this reason but left because they lost interest in 4-H	% youth who stayed for other reasons but left because they lost interest 4-H
I had fun	76%	56%	77%
I learned new things	72%	56%	77%
I enjoyed working on projects participating in fairs	61%	51%	78%
I liked doing community service	56%	48%	82%
I liked teaching others things I know how to do	40%	44%	72%

**How the Nature of 4-H Club Experience Effected Leaving**

The study asked nine questions about 4-H club experience and participation. These included questions about youth having fun, feeling safe, running the club meetings and being recognized for contributions. Only four of the reasons for leaving were related to club experience as noted in Table 3. To determine the nature of the experience, an average experience score was created for each survey participant, ranging from 1-3. Based on these scores, groups were created to reflect poor, average and better 4-H club experiences.

It was noted that the more average level of experience the more likely youth were to leave than those with poor or better experiences because they did not feel welcomed, learn as much or get enough help. Youth with poor club experiences were more likely to leave because they were not able to teach than youth with average or better experiences. For youth who had better experiences, we know less about the reasons they left.

**TABLE 3—Relationship Between Reasons Youth Left 4-H and Average Club Experience**

<b>Reason left</b>	<b>Poor</b>		<b>Average</b>		<b>Better</b>	
Not welcomed	26%	N=14	53%	N=18	5%	N=3
Did not learn as much	48%	N=27	56%	N=19	23%	N=15
Not enough help	35%	N=20	36%	N=12	13%	N=8
Not able to teach	22%	N=12	18%	N=6	6%	N=4

**Key Finding and Implications for the 4-H Program**

Findings from the 2009 retention survey provide valuable information to inform youth development staff as they create a plan to improve retention in 4-H Youth Development. The more significant relationship found between staying and leaving as opposed to joining and leaving indicates it is more important to understand why youth stay in 4-H, therefore putting more focus on identifying factors that protect youth for staying.

The implications have been organized by the Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development with considerations for both staff and the organization. The analysis of survey results suggest that if these changes are made in 4-H, significant strides will be made in keeping youth in the program.

**BELONGING**

The data reflects that a welcoming environment for a club is vital for youth to stay with 4-H. This is where those first critical relationships in 4-H are built. Youth that liked their club leaders tended to view their experience as welcoming, learning, and supported.

Implication for Staff: How can staff support volunteers in creating and strengthening a welcoming environment for 4-H clubs, 4-H project meetings, activities, and events? How do staff help volunteers better understand what youth want to learn and how best to support them?

Implication for Organization: Do staff and volunteers need to embrace and have heightened awareness of how critical a welcoming environment is for 4-H youth? How does the organization recognize staff and volunteers that are strengthening and creating a welcoming environment for 4-H youth? How do staff better access and apply the resources and research available?

While youth don't necessarily join 4-H because of friendships, it appears the relationships the youth form while in 4-H is a reason they stay and lack of those relationships contributed to their decision to leave the program.

Implication for Staff: How can staff support volunteers to foster friendships within the 4-H club, project meeting or county experience? In what ways can 4-H'ers integrate friends who are not 4-H members into their 4-H experience?



Implication for Organization: What further research needs to be conducted to understand why youth who joined because their friends were in 4-H left because of other activities? Did their friends leave 4-H, too?

## **MASTERY**

Youth indicated they stayed in 4-H because they learned new things. Learning was important to young people and they chose not to stay with the program when they did not learn what they expected to and were not having fun with the learning. When youth join because of projects, 4-H must tend to their need to learn to protect against leaving.

Implications for Staff: Do we offer a variety of learning and leadership opportunities in multiple ways that support developing individual interests and potential? Are we putting up barriers, both at the local level and beyond, for participation in project learning at county and state events? How can we strengthen the project experience for 4-H members? What training can staff provide to volunteers who support youth project learning? How are we enhancing the fair and exhibition experience for youth members?

Implications for the Organization: How can we provide additional opportunities and resources for staff and volunteers to strengthen the project and exhibition experience for youth? How can we strengthen the reflection part of the experiential learning process to insure that it is happening with youth and adults together to better assess the local program? Are there sufficient tools in place to support reflection and evaluation of 4-H meetings, activities, and events?

Teaching others protects against losing interest, so focus needs to be put on developing mastery in youth that includes a component of sharing what they've learned with others.

Implications for Staff: How are youth currently teaching others in 4-H? What training needs to be done to support youth in sharing their knowledge? How do staff encourage volunteers to create opportunities for youth teaching?

Implications for the Organization: Are there adequate resources available for staff and volunteers to support youth teaching? What avenues are currently open for teaching, and how accessible are they to members?

## **INDEPENDENCE**

Is 4-H fun? The data says that nearly one quarter of respondents said "no". Although fun has a personal definition and perception for each individual, this is often part of the marketing strategy to potential members and families. Data indicated that responders did enjoy projects, fairs and events. The variety of favorite projects reported was vast. Data also indicated that the majority of those non-returning 4-H members that did not graduate did not take advantage of county opportunities such as camp, youth leader experiences, clothing or foods review, or leadership conference experiences such as state youth conferences.

Implications for Staff: What support or training is offered for volunteers in leadership roles to provide a variety of activities and events for youth members? Are traditional

activities given a new look from time to time so they retain their vitality? Are we creating an atmosphere where new ideas and creativity are embraced? Are youth at the table to provide input when decisions are made regarding organizational management, educational activities, events and recreation? Do we insure that there are a variety of opportunities provided that address the current personal attributes of youth? Are both youth and adult volunteers given the opportunity to reflect on how “fun” 4-H activities and events are, so their experiences provide insights as to whether or not change is needed? Do we support volunteers in working with youth to involve them in leadership of the club?

Implications for the Organization: Is there support for alternative ways to implement core experiences and events that could be viewed as tradition to better meet the needs of today’s youth? These could include recording their achievements, setting their goals, completing community service, being recognized. How is embracing change in traditional 4-H experiences supported for staff?

## **GENEROSITY**

Participants indicated that they did come to 4-H to have some opportunities to be part of community service experiences and teach others.

Implications for Staff: How are youth engaged in the selection, carrying out and evaluation of community service events? What opportunities are made available for youth to teach others? How are youth supported in being able to learn and then teach others?

Implications for the Organization: Are the tools and resources accessible for volunteers and staff to strengthen service learning opportunities for youth? Are there recognition systems in place to reward community service and sharing with others?

## **Implications for New Studies**

This study generated more questions that warrant further research in order to better understand and support youth development program retention efforts. While young people may join or stay in a program because of fun, better defining “fun” will assist in creating environment to meet youth needs. Additionally, as the field understands why youth lost interest, it will help organizations implement program supports to protect against it.

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