



## A DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK OF 4-H COMPETITION FOR VOLUNTEERS

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# A Developmental Framework of 4-H Competition for Volunteers

## Competition and its Effects

Webster's Dictionary (1979) makes useful distinctions about types of competition, citing that **competition** denotes a striving for the same object, position, prize, etc., usually in accordance with certain fixed rules; **rivalry** implies keen competition between opponents more or less evenly matched, and unqualified, it often suggests unfriendliness or even hostility; **emulation** implies endeavor to equal or surpass in achievement, character, etc. another, usually one greatly admired.

Competition is typically considered a basic animal drive related to survival, whereas sportsmanship is the abstract socialized behavior that emerges as we compete for sport and recreation. There is little argument that competition has both cultural benefits and challenges; it can raise people to the height of peak performance or reduce them to duplicitous self-centered hostility. Sportsmanship is how individuals conduct themselves within competition: it is a learned and social behavior that reflects how individuals have been taught to compete and value competition. Poor sportsmanship can reflect an obsessive focus on achievement at the expense of forming positive social connections. It is a challenge that modern communities and cultures embedded in competition must frequently mitigate (Dunnewold 2007; Wallace et al. 2015). Competition can have positive or negative effects on learning motivation, and these outcomes largely depend on whether those involved see themselves as willingly participating or not (Ryan and Brown 2005; Legault et al. 2006).

The Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development include **Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity** (Kress 2004). These Essential Elements were most likely derived (in part) from preexisting developmental models being advanced in the field of psychology, particularly Cognitive Evaluation Theory, which is a sub-theory of Self Determination Theory (Ryan 1989). A central tenant of this perspective is that social contexts that promote **autonomy, competence, and relatedness** will facilitate intrinsic and internalized motivation (Legault et al. 2006). The defining characteristics of these Essential Elements parallel definitions within Cognitive Evaluation Theory. Independence parallels autonomy, mastery parallels competence, and belonging and generosity parallel with relatedness. These are basic human drives for fulfillment. Autonomy is very similar to the 4-H Essential Element of Independence, which, is identified by National 4-H as futuristic involvement and self-determination (Kress 2004).

## Types of Competition

There are many goals that can be obtained through the use of competition. One of these goals is the gradual emergence of a young person's self-direction and competence as a member of their community. However, there has not been a great deal of guidance heretofore about how to use competition judiciously and beneficially, to support, rather than hinder, intrinsic learning motivation.

The National 4-H Recognition Handbook (Parsons 1996) provided an excellent research-informed training for adults about youth engagement in competition and achievement. The National 4-H Recognition Model pointed out there are three kinds of competition:

1. **Goal-Identified:** Setting and striving for goals, striving against our own best record.
2. **Standardized:** Measuring our products or performance against standards of excellence.
3. **Affiliative:** Competing against another person or group, in comradery or rivalry.

The national model also pointed out varying levels of readiness for competition based on ages that fall within range of our 4-H age groupings. There are four age groupings in traditional 4-H programs:

- Cloverbuds: 5–7 years
- Juniors: 8–10 years
- Intermediates: 11–13 years
- Seniors: 14–19 years

Pre-determined age groupings inform competitive classes, and cross-age competitions are usually not permitted. (Seniors do not compete against Juniors, for example.) This fulfills the definition that competitive **rivals** should be *more or less evenly matched* (Webster's 1979).

The Washington State 4-H Program Policy cites that youth below the age of 8 are not eligible to participate in competitive events (WSU 2014). The National 4-H Headquarters also discourages Cloverbuds from competition. Sometimes a 4-H Cloverbuds member will be physically capable of doing something but will not be able to understand the reason for the process or the result. Participation in that activity would be just as inappropriate as participation in an activity that is unsafe because of physical limitations (USDA 2011).

## A Developmental Approach to Competition

A typical approach to 4-H competition appears to be that as soon as a youth comes of age (8), they are released into the competitive arena and immediately begin taking on goal-identified, standardized, and affiliative competitions all at once (Figure 1). One value of the National 4-H Recognition Handbook is that it recognized and accounted for developmental attributes, with the hope of building a stronger recognition of the personal needs and motives of young participants. Since the handbook, additional tools have also been developed to help volunteers recognize the general developmental attributes of our participants. We propose now that different kinds of competition may be more developmentally appropriate for each age grouping, based on the generalized developmental attributes for each stage of growth. However, types of competition are not surpassed or abandoned as youth get older, they are simply incorporated into the program of excellence that defines each more progressive level of engagement (Figure 2).

## Cloverbuds and Participation: Belonging and Affiliation

It has been said by many that play is the work of children. Children play because their intrinsic motive is to engage their environment; when properly motivated, youth will use new knowledge to take on greater challenges. Some researchers have suggested that giving external rewards can actually decrease a young person's natural curiosity and interest in learning (Deci and Ryan 2013; Deci 1971). In early childhood, when the attachment to their parents is strong, competition is discouraged because of the child's inability to separate their self-worth from the tasks they are learning and their parent's approval. It is commonly accepted that children under 8 are generally not physically or emotionally ready for competition. But that doesn't mean they have to be left at home! 4-H Cloverbuds (5–8 years of age) should be recognized and encouraged to be a part of what is going on around them.

When engaging primary aged youth, there are a few simple ways to safely recognize them and encourage their participation:

- Encourage voluntary participation.
- Choose activities that stress individual engagement (e.g., having youth share their personal interests).
- Begin teaching appropriate prerequisite skills that are within the boundaries of 4-H policy.
- Engage and appreciate Cloverbuds for participating. Recognition should not be based on a win/loss or judgement contingency.



Figure 1. Inclusive participation in competition. Reproduced by permission from Wallace and Weybright (2016).

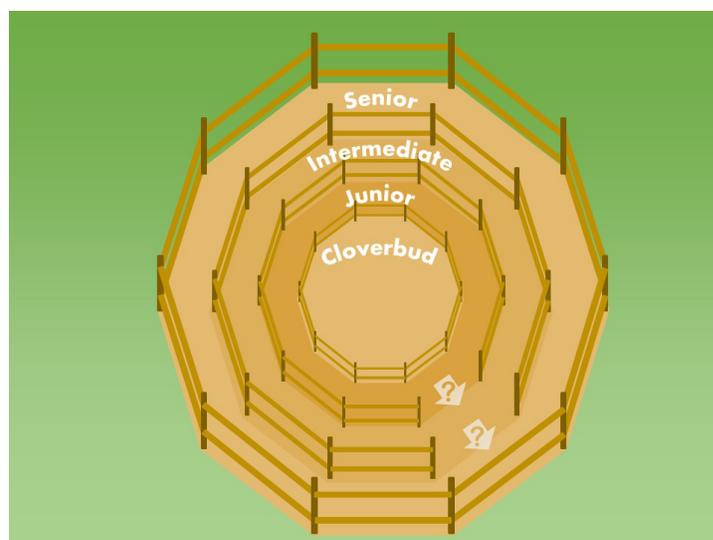


Figure 2. Graduated participation in competition. Reproduced by permission from Wallace and Weybright (2016).

- Verbally encourage and acknowledge the child's interests. This is not the same as praising or shaming their behavior, or providing them with external rewards or consequences.

Younger children usually enjoy social interaction with caring adults, and they will feel happy that their interests are important to others.

## Juniors and Independence: Efficacy and Goal Setting

Young people, ages 8–10, are generally taking an expanded interest in their own self-agency. They are discovering that they can make goals, track them from one day to the next, and accomplish longer term goals that require multiple efforts over a prolonged period of time. The skills we can encourage in this

age group are those related to:

- Setting and tracking one's own goals.
- Evaluating one's accomplishments against one's own goals.
- Evaluating one's goals and achievements alongside a nurturing adult.
- Participating in comparative competition should be optional.

This is usually the age many 4-H programs allow competition to initiate, and many parents are eager to enter their children into the arena. Sensing their child is trying to develop self-esteem around their abilities and self-agency, parents may feel the need to be protective and defensive. Volunteers should *keep the focus on the youth*, encourage the child to assess their own work, and make their best better. Helping young people develop pride in self-agency will be very meaningful for youth in this age group. Effective judges can share a passion for the topic and translate that into questions of choice and agency. This is the age to introduce making the best better by competing against one's own best record (Parsons 1996).

## Intermediates and Mastery: Standards

It has been observed that middle school aged youth (11–13 years old) can generally be both idealistic and driven by the need to see the world as fair and predictable. Youth in this age group are usually evaluating themselves against their peers, and their widening awareness of physical and social differences can make them particularly self-conscious. Project enrollment trends in 4-H tend to confirm that this is also the peak age for youth taking an interest in multiple project areas. The following recommendations are then considered beneficial to youth in this age group:

- Try new things. Competence and enjoyment can be discovered in unlikely places.
- Measure efforts against predefined and stable standards of excellence and quality.
- Nurture friendships with people who have similar interests.
- Identify nurturing mentors outside the immediate family that model good sportsmanship.

The attribute suggested for this age group is competition against standards of excellence; it is inquiry and effort that lead to the discovery of how to improve a product. Unlike a performance sport, in 4-H the evaluative process of the competition can be focused on a product created or raised by

the youth. This can ease the self-consciousness generally witnessed in this age group. When judges sense a young person is challenged with self-consciousness, they can shift attention off the individual and objectively on a product. Be aware that intermediate age participants are more likely to cite being with friends as their motive for competing, (Maloney et al. 2009). Leaders and parents should stress the enjoyable social aspects of the activity. Supportive adults can remind young people not to over-generalize the results of a competition. In life, we will usually always meet people better or more challenged than we are; we all have strengths and weaknesses.

## Seniors and Competition: Friends Who Play Fair

If youth are gradually taught the previous stages of engagement, competition at the 4-H Senior age should be an enjoyable experience. Teens frequently feel ready to assume the mantle of maturity. Their peer groups have typically taken a predominant role in their social lives so their interpretation of competition can be positive or negative depending on the effects of winning and losing on their peer relations. If they have developed a positive outlook on competition, this age group should demonstrate a respect for fairness and inclusion, and they will enjoy the competition regardless of the outcomes. This is an age suitable to deeper reflection on the outcomes of one's choices, an age where making the best better really becomes an act of self-determination. Teens need to be given, and will hopefully respect, the autonomy to choose the level of their engagement. Clear guidelines and mutual endorsement in the goals of competition should be accessible to all youth if our goal is the development of individuals who will eventually assume responsibility for their choices and actions.

Productive competitions require:

- Voluntary participation.
- Good sportsmanship.
- Clear rules and expectations, including policies of non-discrimination.
- Debriefing (self-assessment of what has been learned, regardless of whether one is a winner or loser).

Teens who have grown up in 4-H may begin expressing some apathy towards competition, having hit their first “glass ceiling” early in life. For them, the goal of leadership and sharing knowledge can become a powerful incentive to remain in the program.

# Generosity, Cooperation, and Emulation: A Deeper Sense of Belonging

Alfie Kohn (1986) said the ubiquity of cooperative interactions, even in a relatively competitive society, is powerful evidence against the generalization that humans are naturally competitive. Like the play of children, our sports, our fairs, our cultural arts, and our service are arenas where individuals strive collectively, not so much for themselves, but for their communities.

Striving together, or competing as a group, can help individuals create a shared history, building trust and profound bonds of empathy. Positive development in 4-H competition eventually transcends individual reward. Young people discover their efforts have given them determination, focus, and mastery, which they can then share with others. Peer leadership, sharing expertise with younger or newer members, is a hallmark of a successful community of practice and a successful 4-H program.

Communities of practice:

- Are frequently composed of voluntary membership.
- Are built around a strong sense of a communal identity.
- Develop members' expertise through sharing knowledge.
- Grow and change as a result of the contribution of their membership (Nickols 2012).

When younger members **emulate** their teen leaders, they strive not only to be like them but to surpass them. (Webster's 1979). This is a highly advanced kind of competition built on a foundation of respect and admiration for the skills of others. When teens master the stresses and challenges of competition, they have the incredible advantage of preparing younger members for similar competitions. Teens that become autonomous role models with communal values can share the example of successfully integrating regulations and demonstrating the strength of their own values about competition and cooperation. For adolescents, this process of values clarification can be the capstone experience that transforms the values they have been taught into the values they adopt and share as their own.

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