

editor's page

Is 4-H Too Competitive?

Recently I was asked if I thought 4-H was too competitive. I'm not sure whether my questioner expected me to give him a yes or no answer—but, I couldn't and didn't. Among 4-H professionals, volunteers, parents, and members, nothing illicit more heated discussions than simplistic statements about 4-H awards. We've all heard statements like: "There's too much emphasis on 4-H awards." "We need more awards." "Competition is bad." "Competition is good." Generally, they generate heat and very little light on the whole subject.

What we really need is more research related to competition in 4-H. Working on the Incentives in 4-H project for the last 2 years, we've discovered only limited research that's been done on competition in 4-H or other out-of-school youth programs.

One example of research in this area is Kathy Treat's study that shows that authoritarian 4-H leaders tend to be more competitive, score higher on extrinsic awards, and are less inclined to favor intrinsic awards. A projection of these data might be that authoritarian people would tend to use competition and extrinsic awards as primary motivators of young people, while democratic leaders would rely on intrinsic awards.

I'm convinced that your approach to working with young people depends on your own philosophic orientation. If you're highly competitive, then you're likely to say that 4-H isn't too competitive. If, however, you tend to avoid competition or are motivated by noncompetitive activities, then you might say 4-H is too competitive.

Whatever your point of view on competition, you'll find the Rosenthal and Glass contribution to the Forum and the selected reactions to their article interesting. We've printed these comments to stimulate discussion. How do you react? Write us a letter!

And now back to how I answered my questioner. My response went something like this. I believe that competition isn't *THE* motivating factor for young people, or for that matter, adults either. For some young people, competition will spur them to action, for others it will turn them off. 4-H is too competitive if there's not an equal opportunity for all young people to gain satisfaction from being involved in 4-H. We must continue to find ways of providing both competitors and noncompetitors satisfying opportunities in 4-H.

This is no easy challenge. We'd all be better if we stopped arguing about whether there's too much or too little competition and found ways to provide youth with a variety of learning experiences and didn't emphasize one approach more than another.

JP