

Applying 4-H Judging Strategies to Board, Dice, and Card Games: Developing Skills in Urban and Suburban Youths

Abstract

Most 4-H judging events involve livestock or other traditional 4-H projects. Consequently, many urban and suburban youths miss out on building life skills developed through judging. In a nontraditional approach to 4-H judging, such youths play board, dice, and card games and then judge the games using the practice of giving oral reasons. The youths also reflect on the life skills learned while playing and judging the games. This approach has been used in a Washington State 4-H program. Youths have responded positively, demonstrated skills, and returned to the program year after year. Because Extension offices across the country have resources related to judging, the approach is easily replicated.

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Introduction

In today's job market, the top skills new employees need include teamwork, communication, and decision making (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz, 2011), skills also used in 4-H livestock judging and in playing board, dice, and card games. Many youth development professionals and volunteers engage youths in 4-H judging, but mainly with livestock or other traditional 4-H projects. Consequently, many urban and suburban youths miss out on gaining skills developed through the judging activity. However, an opportunity exists to help these youths develop life skills, or what some call job skills or social emotional learning (SEL), by having them play games and then judge those games after playing them. In the Washington State University Extension Pierce County 4-H Program, we taught urban youths, aged 6–12, to develop skills while playing board, dice, and cards games and to use oral reasons to judge the games after playing them. Youths have responded positively, demonstrated skills, and returned to the program year after year. Replicating our approach is easy to do and will help ensure that more urban and suburban youths develop needed skills while having fun and remaining engaged in 4-H.

Evidence suggests that both 4-H judging and game playing develop life skills. Judging animal projects

teaches effective decision making (Hiller & Newman, 2008) and skills in "communication, . . . problem solving, self-discipline, self-motivation, teamwork and organization" (Nash & Sant, 2005, "Conclusions and Recommendations," para. 1). Moreover, the use of judging has been expanded beyond animal projects to increase 4-H members' skill development in the area of consumer decision making as well (Olson & Croymans, 2008). Additionally, research has shown that game playing is an effective means of developing SEL and has a place in youth development (Hromek & Roffey, 2009). Playing games can help develop interpersonal skills (Lieberman, 2006) and reduce later adjustment issues (Coplan, Rubin, & Findlay, 2006). Judging and game playing both are robust activities for supporting developing youths.

Procedure

To replicate the approach we applied in the Pierce County 4-H Program, apply the steps presented here, modifying or rephrasing for age appropriateness and compatibility with your skill level.

Step 1. Educate yourself on judging by using Extension resources. This article does not go into detail about teaching the use of oral reasons as there are applicable guides, videos, and publications available through local Extension offices and online searches.

Step 2. Educate yourself on simple game design, and determine what aspects of games youths will judge. Aspects of games and a common language for discussing games are highly debated topics (Elias, Garfield, & Gutschera, 2012; Koster, 2013; Winn, 2008), so keeping things simple is appropriate. A three-step approach to game design, developed by Marc LeBlanc, takes into account the following aspects of a game: mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004). Each can be used as an aspect by which to judge games. A simplified version of LeBlanc's definitions are as follows:

- **Mechanics**—the formal rules that define the operation of the game, what the player can do, the challenges the player will face, and the player's goals.
- **Dynamics**—the resulting run-time behavior of the game when the game's rules, or mechanics, are instantiated over time with the influence of the players' interactions (Winn, 2008, p. 1024).
- **Aesthetics**—" . . . the resulting emotional responses in the player when playing" (Winn, 2008, p. 1013).

Step 3. Select a life skill youths can work on while playing the games. The targeted life skills model encourages selecting only one or a few life skills so that greater growth will occur (Hendricks, 1998). In the Pierce County 4-H Program, we used teamwork and communication.

Step 4. Inform youths of the outcomes you hope they will experience from participating in the activity—fun while playing the games, development of life skills through playing the games, and development of life skills through judging the games.

Step 5. Have youths play age-appropriate games and then discuss what life skills they improved by playing the games. Reflection activities have been shown to increase learning (Ripberger, 2008; Torock, 2009). Providing three reflection questions (see Figure 1) can be helpful (Brandt, 2014).

Figure 1.
Basic Life Skill Debrief Question Sequence

At the end of judging, use experiential education questions to have youths reflect on the life skills they improved while judging the games. One option for this process is to focus on communication skills (see Figure 3) (Wallace et al., 2014).

Figure 3.

Communication Debrief Question Sequence

Communication Strand

What: What happened with your communication?

So What: So what did you learn about good communication?

Now What: Now what can you do to be a better communicator today?

Now What: Now what can you do to be a better communicator today?

Step 8. Use repetition to increase skill building. In the Pierce County 4-H Program, we did this process over many sessions by repeating steps 3–7. Repeat by playing different games and judging them on different aspects or on multiple aspects combined.

Conclusion

In any state, urban and suburban youths can be targeted to benefit from the lifetime of advantages provided by playing games and judging. Participants have fun and are engaged while learning. Extension can fill a need for urban and suburban youths being served in 4-H through this nontraditional approach to skill development.

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