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4-H Members and Firearms: The Case for 4-H Shooting Sports

Abstract

As events of human violence emerge on the national stage and as individuals raise concerns about youths having access to firearms, it is important that Extension professionals, land-grant university administrators, and university legal counsels understand the guiding principles of the 4-H Shooting Sports program. This commentary addresses 4-H Shooting Sports program priorities and program management, the program's safety record, and the rationale for introducing 4-H members to firearms. The article is not a defensive justification of the 4-H Shooting Sports program. Instead, it is a demonstration of the relevance and safety of a 4-H program area that reaches hundreds of thousands of young people each year.

Keywords: [shooting sports](#), [positive youth development](#), [safety](#), [program management](#), [instructor development](#)

Jeff Goodwin

State 4-H Leader
Department of Family
and Consumer
Sciences
University of Hawai'i,
Mānoa
Honolulu, Hawaii
jeffg3@hawaii.edu
[@JeffGoodwinHI](#)

David J. White

4-H Youth
Development
Specialist
Oregon State
University
Redmond, Oregon
david.white@oregonstate.edu
[ate.edu](#)

M'Randa R. Sandlin

Assistant Researcher
Department of
Tropical Plant and Soil
Sciences
University of Hawai'i,
Mānoa
Honolulu, Hawaii
msandlin@hawaii.edu
[@PIECenterHawaii](#)

Situation

The 4-H Shooting Sports program, which includes projects in archery, hunting skills, muzzle-loading firearms, pistol, rifle, shotgun, and western heritage, is one of the largest and safest 4-H programs. According to Conrad Arnold, program coordinator of National 4-H Shooting Sports, the program was established nearly 40 years ago and now engages 428,000 young people per year (C. Arnold, personal communication, November 26, 2018). Approximately half of these participants are involved through short-term experiences, such as camps and fairs, and the other half are part of long-term, more extensive experiences in 4-H club environments (C. Arnold, personal communication, November 26, 2018). When incidents involving firearms make the news, university legal counsels and others may question Extension administrators about 4-H's involvement in shooting sports. It is essential for Extension personnel to be able to explain why 4-H uses firearms as an educational, recreational, and competitive means for promoting positive youth development (PYD). Herein, we provide information pertinent to such an explanation as well as the rationale for the importance of the 4-H Shooting Sports program.

For decades, instruction on the safe and responsible use of archery equipment and firearms has been an effective

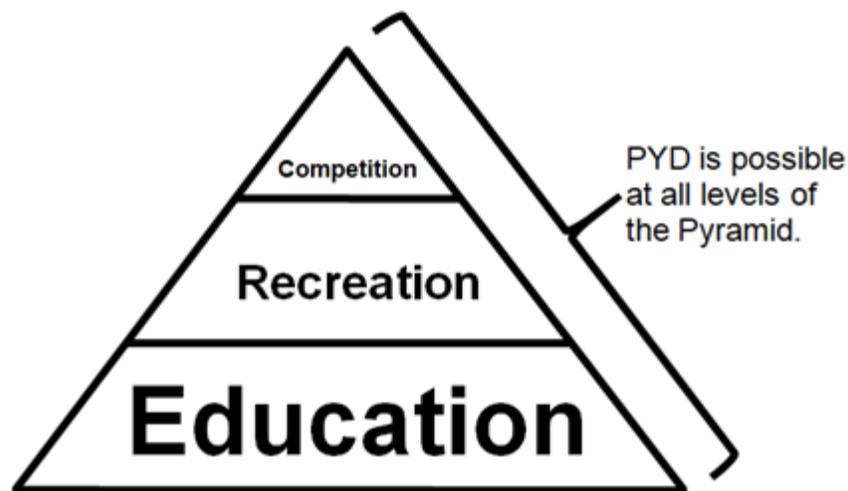
educational tool in various Extension outreach and engagement initiatives. Examples of the foci of such programming, as identified through peer-reviewed documentation, are engagement of hard-to-reach youths (Sabo & Hamilton, 1997), 4-H camping program activities (Hines & Riley, 2005), spring break activities for youths (Gillespie, 2006), life skills development (Leggette, Lawrence, Merten, & McGill, 2013), promotion of risk management related to firearm transportation and storage (White & Smith, 2014; White & Williver, 2014), online volunteer orientation (Culp, Hance, Reynolds, & Bentley, 2016), and training and certification of coaches (Martin & Kaufman, 2017). These examples demonstrate that 4-H Shooting Sports programming is a key component of 4-H at local, state, and national levels. Indeed, the safe and responsible use of firearms is an outcome measure in the National 4-H Common Measures instrument (Lewis, Horrillo, Widaman, Worker, & Trzesniewski, 2015). Furthermore, Hill and Goodwin (2015) have documented the positive economic contribution of 4-H Shooting Sports at the local and state levels.

4-H Shooting Sports Program Priorities

An examination of the 4-H Shooting Sports Priority Pyramid helps explain the overall philosophy, scope, and direction of the program and its potential for PYD (see Figure1).

Figure 1.

4-H Shooting Sports Priority Pyramid



PYD = positive youth development. Adapted from "Module 3—Creating and Implementing a High Quality Program," by S. T. Williver and D. J. White, 2018, *National 4-H Shooting Sports: Primers for 4-H Shooting Sports Instructors*, p. 28. Copyright 2018 by the National 4-H Shooting Sports Committee.

In this model, education forms the foundation and largest portion of the pyramid. According to Arnold (2018), "Youth programs, like 4-H, have the potential to provide a supportive context for thriving" (p. 144). The 4-H Shooting Sports program provides that supportive context in that, as suggested by Arnold (2018), it allows young people opportunities to explore their passions and interests, promotes positive relationships with adults, reflects the elements of a high-quality program, and engages youths in a well-rounded 4-H experience.

The next priority level in the model, recreation, rests on the sound foundation of education. According to Milteer and Ginsburg (2012), guided and unstructured recreational opportunities help youths grow socially and emotionally; bolster creativity and imagination; lead to healthy brain development; enhance physical health; aid in learning to share, negotiate, and resolve conflicts; and build resiliency.

The final level of the pyramid is competition. Although it comprises the smallest area of the model, competition is at the top of the pyramid because it is a highly visible and culminating event at county, state, and national levels. Radhakrishna, Everhart, and Sinasky (2006) found that competition was beneficial in helping youths "learn new things, develop life skills, set goals, and strive for excellence" (para. 20).

As is the case with other 4-H programs, PYD is the primary goal of 4-H Shooting Sports. PYD is promoted at all levels of the pyramid. Just as work with animals is a means to achieving PYD in the more traditional 4-H horse and livestock project areas, use of firearms serves the same purpose. The 4-H Shooting Sports program's focus on PYD underscores that the program is more concerned with creating champion youths—not necessarily champion marksmen and markswomen.

Instructional Focus of 4-H Shooting Sports

To acknowledge potential concerns about the 4-H Shooting Sports program's introducing 4-H members to firearms, it is important to be aware of the four concepts that drive the program's instructional components: (a) encouraging life skills development and PYD, (b) training adults to be effective teachers of young people, (c) teaching the first shot, and (d) advancing safety.

- *Encouraging life skills development and PYD.* The focus on life skills development and PYD sets 4-H Shooting Sports apart from other youth shooting sports programs. Of course, these two principles are the foundation for all 4-H programs, not just 4-H Shooting Sports.
- *Training adults to be effective teachers of young people.* The National 4-H Shooting Sports Committee, which is chartered by the National 4-H Program Leader Working Group, establishes the minimum standards related to instructor certification requirements (Goodwin, 2018). All 4-H Shooting Sports instructors receive a minimum of 12 hr of training in PYD, risk management, and shooting instruction before they can teach 4-H members at the county level. At the national level, no other 4-H project area requires this level of volunteer/instructor training (J. Kahler, personal communication, August 27, 2018).
- *Teaching the first shot.* 4-H Shooting Sports specializes in teaching young people to shoot their first shot and to shoot that first shot safely. The program is an introduction to the responsible and safe use of archery equipment and firearms for youths and adults.
- *Advancing safety.* Safety is a high priority of the 4-H Shooting Sports program. The program incorporates memorization, recollection, and internalization by participants to instill fundamental safety standards and ensure that those standards become second nature to 4-H members. In addition, 4-H Shooting Sports does not condone or promote simulated combat sports, such as paintball, because such activities run counter to the safety principles that are reinforced in 4-H Shooting Sports.

Safety Record of 4-H Shooting Sports

Although the literature regarding 4-H project safety is sparse, the topic is an issue or subject of study in project

areas beyond shooting sports. For example, states require youths in 4-H horse and pony projects to wear helmets (McKee & Brady, 2004), and the 4-H all-terrain vehicle project involves rules regarding the use of personal protective equipment (National 4-H Council, 2011). In fact, American Income Life, the major accident insurance provider for 4-H clubs, assesses a higher premium for enrollment in horse, all-terrain vehicle, motorcycle, and team sports projects, whereas 4-H Shooting Sports enrollees are assessed at the regular rate. However, it remains important for Extension administrators to have the information necessary to address the question "Is it safe to put firearms in the hands of youths?"

When assessing the safety of the 4-H Shooting Sports program, it is helpful to compare the program to other youth sporting activities. Table 1 shows annual participation figures, numbers of injuries requiring medical attention, and injury rates for youth sports in the United States.

Table 1.
Annual Youth Sports Participation, Injuries, and Injury Rates in the United States

| Sport | Annual participation (#) | Injuries (#) | Injury rate (%) |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Football | 5,286,000 ^a | 354,300 | 6.7 |
| Wrestling | 805,000 | 38,900 | 4.8 |
| Basketball | 9,694,000 | 359,300 | 3.7 |
| Lacrosse | 804,000 | 17,700 | 2.2 |
| Softball | 2,622,000 ^b | 53,300 | 2.0 |
| Soccer | 9,828,000 ^c | 171,000 | 1.7 |
| Baseball | 6,711,000 | 106,100 | 1.6 |
| Hockey | 1,113,000 ^d | 15,600 | 1.4 |
| Volleyball | 2,680,000 ^e | 34,700 | 1.3 |
| Gymnastics | 2,809,000 | 33,000 | 1.2 |
| Track and field | 2,417,000 | 23,900 | 1.0 |
| 4-H Shooting Sports | 338,621 | 0.12 ^f | <0.00004 |

Note. Annual participation numbers for 2014 obtained from "Youth Sports Participation Statistics and Trends," by P. Langhorst, 2016, *Engage Sports*. Retrieved from <http://engagesports.com/blog/post/1488/youth-sports-participation-statistics-and-trends>. Annual injury numbers for 2013 obtained from "Sports and Recreation Safety Fact Sheet," by Safe Kids Worldwide, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.safekids.org/sites/default/files/documents/skw_sports_fact_sheet_feb_2015.pdf. 4-H Shooting Sports annual participation numbers through 2014 and annual injury numbers through 2013 obtained from the National 4-H Shooting Sports Committee (C. Arnold, personal communication, August 2, 2018).

^aTackle and touch football combined. ^bFast-pitch and slow-pitch softball combined. ^cIndoor and outdoor soccer combined. ^dIce and field hockey combined. ^eCourt and sand/beach volleyball combined. ^fFour injuries in a 34-year history of the program (1980–2014).

Some sample comparisons based on the data in Table 1 help emphasize the notable safety record of 4-H Shooting Sports. A youth engaged in soccer would be 42,500 times more likely to sustain an injury requiring medical attention than a youth in 4-H Shooting Sports would be. A similar comparison suggests that a youth football player would be 167,500 times more likely than a 4-H Shooting Sports member to sustain such an injury.

As demonstrated by the data, 4-H Shooting Sports is one of the safest educational, recreational, and competitive activities in which youths can be involved.

Rationale for the Importance of 4-H Shooting Sports

The rationale for introducing 4-H members to firearms, as supported by the program's priorities, focus, and commitment to safety, is multifaceted. For youths who are curious about or have an interest in archery and firearms, the 4-H Shooting Sports program (a) assures proper training in the safe and responsible use of archery equipment and firearms; (b) places youths in the care of trained, caring adults; (c) provides opportunities for quality family involvement; (d) provides positive peer groups for youths; (e) teaches youths to respect the deleterious potential of improper use of archery equipment and firearms; and (f) emphasizes respect for other people (Goodwin, 2018).

Conclusion

The 4-H Shooting Sports program is one of the largest 4-H project areas in many states and nationally. The risk management safeguards employed in the 4-H Shooting Sports program exceed other 4-H project areas. Moreover, the injury rate for this youth activity is far below that of other youth sporting activities. For the last 38 years, the 4-H Shooting Sports program has held true to a philosophy of comprehensive education, lifelong recreation, and healthful competition. It, like other 4-H project areas (Arnold, 2018), offers youths an environment in which youth thriving leads to positive developmental outcomes and a successful transition into adulthood.

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