

Effective Communication of 4-H Program Essentials to 4-H Families

Abstract

Youths and parents in the California 4-H program have reported issues with communication and challenges in understanding the program. As a result, we developed a family handbook and other supporting documents to help youths and parents navigate the California 4-H program. This article addresses the development, dissemination, and reach of the handbook. Additionally, the article discusses future directions and implications for other Extension programs.

Keywords: [4-H](#), [family handbook](#), [4-H guide](#), [4-H knowledge base](#), [FAQ](#)

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Youth enrollment in 4-H has decreased in a majority of the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010). 4-H academic staff in California examined enrollment trends from 2007 to 2014 and found that 50% of youths were enrolled in the program for only 1 year (Lewis, Horrillo, Worker, Miller, & Trzesniewski, 2015). The Youth Retention Study (YRS) team (a group of 4-H staff nationwide) developed a survey for first-year youths and parents to assess their experience in the program and understand why youths do not return (Lewis et al., 2018). Qualitative responses from the survey showed that many youths and parents felt that the program was disorganized and lacking in communication (Miller et al., 2016). Conversations with parents and youths revealed that 4-H essentials can be hard to understand. As members of the YRS team, we developed University of California 4-H's *Handbook for Families*, a resource to help 4-H members and families learn about 4-H program essentials.

Development of the Handbook

To create the handbook, which we originally titled "Handbook for New Families," we reviewed existing 4-H handbooks from California and other states. We considered comments youths and parents involved in the YRS survey had provided regarding what information would have been useful for them to know upon enrolling in the program. We gathered sections of the existing handbooks that were most relevant and necessary for understanding the program. We also generated a list of other information we wanted to include that was not in

existing handbooks. We focused on state-level policies, procedures, events, and other information with the intent that counties could supplement the handbook content with their own information, if desired. The final handbook included sections on topics such as club and project structure, leadership opportunities, incentives and recognition, and annual events. The handbook also was translated into Spanish to reach our growing number of Spanish-speaking families. The handbook can be found at <http://4h.ucanr.edu/files/285142.pdf> (English) and <http://4h.ucanr.edu/files/285143.pdf> (Spanish).

We also developed a County Information Sheet that is a fillable pdf file for youths to complete. There are spaces on the front of the sheet for contact information for other club and project members who can serve as resources (e.g., club officers). This side also includes spaces for writing down meeting dates and times. We designed the backside of the sheet to be filled in by the county prior to giving the form to youths and families. This side includes contact information for the local 4-H office, website links, and space for counties to include other information, such as county fees or procedures. The County Information Sheet can be found at <http://4h.ucanr.edu/files/285138.pdf> (English) and <http://4h.ucanr.edu/files/285139.pdf> (Spanish).

Finally, we developed a Project Leader Checklist to help volunteers know what they should be doing to get their projects up and running and ensure communication with youths and families about meeting times. The Project Leader Checklist can be found at <http://4h.ucanr.edu/files/254367.pdf>.

Release of the Handbook

We used several methods to announce the availability of the handbook. First, we informed county-based staff about the handbook through our monthly Zoom calls and sent them electronic copies of it. We asked staff to send the handbook to club and project leaders. We also sent the handbook to all first-year youths and families via email. Through informal interactions with youths and families who had been in the program more than 1 year, we realized that the handbook was useful for all families regardless of how long they had been in the program. We deleted "new" from the title and then emailed the handbook and County Information Sheet to all youths and families enrolled at the time. Some counties printed copies of the handbook and mailed them to newly enrolled youths.

Assessing Reach of the Handbook

The YRS team continues to collect data from first-year youths and families. In the 2018 survey, we asked youths and parents whether they were aware of the handbook, whether they had a copy of the handbook, whether they found the handbook useful, what was useful about the handbook, what would make it more useful, and ideas for how best to disseminate the handbook. Only 43% of youths and 36% of parents reported being aware of the handbook. Of those who did know about the handbook, 76% of youths and 85% of parents found it to be "somewhat" or "very" useful. Both youths and parents felt the handbook should be mailed via U.S. mail to new members (81% of youths, 80% of parents), sent electronically (78% of youths, 77% of parents), and handed out at club or project meetings (90% of youths, 88% of parents). As of the 2018–2019 program year, a link to the handbook is included in the welcome email each member receives from 4HOnline upon enrollment in the program. We also asked staff to ensure that volunteers are handing out copies to families. Survey respondents' comments about how to make the handbook more useful generally related to making sure families knew about it and getting it to them in a form they wanted (electronic or hard copy). Feedback received about the usefulness of the handbook has included the following comments:

- "The handbook explains the process of events and provides information that you won't hear at meetings."

- "[The handbook described the] structure of 4-H and the role of 4-H in the community."
- "It explained the basics of how 4-H is run. It was well organized and had great information."

Future Directions

The YRS team will continue to work on improving communication with clientele. The team also will continue to work on ways to increase youth retention, such as by creating fact sheets about best practices for a positive project experience or having a healthy living (or other) officer greet everyone at the beginning of meetings.

Conclusions

University of California 4-H's *Handbook for Families* and supporting documents are valuable tools for assisting youths and families in navigating the program. Youths and parents who have been in the program for several years also have benefited from using the handbook. Personnel across Extension can improve programs by developing help documents such as these to decrease participant frustration related to getting to know a program and to increase participant retention.

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