

---

## **Examining the Reasons and Relationships Between Why Youth Join, Stay in, and Leave 4-H**

**Rebecca Harrington**

University of Minnesota Extension  
Moorhead, MN  
[willi107@umn.edu](mailto:willi107@umn.edu)

**Trisha Sheehan**

University of Minnesota Extension  
Marshall, MN  
[tsheehan@umn.edu](mailto:tsheehan@umn.edu)

**Dale Blyth**

University of Minnesota  
Extension Center for Youth Development  
Minneapolis, MN  
[blyth004@umn.edu](mailto:blyth004@umn.edu)



## Examining the Reasons and Relationships Between Why Youth Join, Stay in, and Leave 4-H

Rebecca Harrington, Trisha Sheehan and Dale Blyth  
University of Minnesota Extension

**Abstract:** While the Minnesota 4-H Club program has grown over 29% in the last six years, annually over 25% of youth do not re-enroll. The Minnesota 4-H Retention Study asked youth who left the program why they decided to join, stay and ultimately leave 4-H. Data from 220 youth were examined to better understand the reasons for and relationship between youth joining and staying in 4-H and their reasons for leaving 4-H. Youth joined 4-H because they wanted to have fun, try new things, and participate in projects and fairs. Top reasons they stayed in 4-H were they liked being with other kids, had fun, and learned new things. Primary reasons youth left were they lost interest in 4-H or became involved in other activities. Examining the relationships revealed that paying particular attention to youth experiences in project learning and teaching, relationships with adults, and youth having fun will increase retention.

### Introduction

While the Minnesota 4-H Club program has been growing rapidly over the last six years, over 25% of youth tracked through the state's individual enrollment database, 4-HPlus, do not re-enroll annually. In order to better understand how 4-H could improve its member retention rate, the Minnesota 4-H Retention Study asked 4-H members who left the program why they decided to join originally, why they stayed in 4-H, and ultimately the reasons they left 4-H.

The research began in 2007 as a cooperative effort between Wisconsin and Minnesota. The initial study was conducted in the summer 2008 with Minnesota youth who were members in 2006-2007 4-H program year but did not re-enroll in 2007. The current article is based on a revised survey and new sample of Minnesota youth who were 4-H members in 2007-2008 but did not re-enroll in 2008.

Research indicates that participation in out-of-school time activities can benefit young people academically, socially, and emotionally (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008). It is important, however, to not only have youth enter programs but keep them involved at a consistent level for a prolonged period of time. Research shows that youth who participate more frequently and for a longer period of time are more likely to benefit academically, to have beliefs about their abilities or to make future educational or occupational plans (Marsh, & Kleitman, 2002; Posner & Vandell, 1999). Thus retaining youth is a major consideration in improving impact.

Studies of retention in 4-H have been conducted across the country but specifically in West Virginia, Kansas, Louisiana, Indiana, and Colorado. A Kansas survey of first year families showed that a lack of understanding of the overall 4-H Program, not feeling welcomed or a part of the club, and other time commitments were major factors in the decision to drop out of 4-H (Astroth, 1985). Indiana research revealed that the most frequent reason for dropping 4-H was displeasure with the 4-H club (Ritchie, & Resler, 1993). Most studies have focused on reasons for leaving 4-H and do not consider why youth join or stay in the program, let alone examine the relationship between these factors.

A number of studies show a positive relationship between staying in a youth program and adult interaction. When adults are helpful, respectful, and nice to 4-H members, youth continue to participate (Ferrari, T.M., & Turner, C.L., 2006). According to some authors, a positive adult-youth relationship may be the most critical element to a program success (Rhodes, 2004; Shortt, 2002). Other factors to examine about why youth continue to be engaged in youth programs are opportunities for leadership, a sense of personal safety, opportunities for socializing with peers, and engagement in high-quality learning experiences (Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005).

While some things are known about why youth join or stay in programs as well as why they leave, this study seeks to examine the relationship between reasons for joining, staying and leaving within a sample of youth that have participated in 4-H for a year or more. By examining reasons across these areas rather than just within each, it is hoped that new insights with implications for youth programs will emerge.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Young people who were Minnesota 4-H club members in 2007-2008 but did not re-enroll in fall of 2008 were asked to complete an online survey if they had an e-mail address. Virtually all individual youth have an email in the program management system used in Minnesota (4-H Plus) although emails frequently change and many of those used for this study were over a year old. The study sent email invitations to 3,073 youth in grades one to eleven. Of these youth, 68 % spent three or fewer years in 4-H and 32% spent more than four years in the program. Youth who did not respond to the initial email were sent one additional reminder. One hundred-four email replies were received indicating that youth were in fact still 4-H members but had not yet re-enrolled. In the end, 220 youth completed valid surveys. Of the participants, 64% were female and 36% were male (compared to the targeted population of 60% female and 40% male). Based on 4-H enrollment data, the average length of 4-H membership for the responders was 3.3 years compared to 3.1 years for the targeted population.

## Data

Each participant was asked to go online to complete a twenty-one item survey that included questions on the following:

- Lists of why youth joined, stayed in, and left 4-H,
- Whether they received information and support from Extension or 4-H club,
- Their perceptions of 4-H club and project meetings,
- What they participated in at club, county and state levels, and
- Their participation in other activities outside of 4-H during their last year and in the year after their 4-H membership.

Questions generally required only a yes/no response. Some questions also offered youth an opportunity to add other reasons through open-ended comments.

Youth invited to complete the survey received a code in the email recruitment letter to allow them to access the survey on line. This approach allowed researchers to both connect responses to existing data on program participation in the program management database and to follow up with non-responders while not asking for names or other identifying information. The survey was identified with and conducted by the University of Minnesota Extension center for Youth development and the Minnesota 4-H program.

Responses were analyzed using SPSS. This article examines both the reasons for joining, staying and leaving 4-H as well as the relationship between these reasons and relationships to grade level and gender using simple Chi-squared tests.

## Results

### Why Youth Joined 4-H Originally

Youth were presented with seven reasons why they might have joined 4-H and asked to select all of the reasons that applied to them. Most youth indicated they originally joined 4-H because they wanted to have fun (91%), try new things (86%), participate in projects and fairs (80%), their parent/guardian signed them up for 4-H (73%), or liked the idea of doing community service (60%). Less common responses were joining because friends were in 4-H (42%) and wanting to teach others (38%). About 10% of youth added an "other" response with the most common responses about joining to work with animals or because other family members were in the 4-H program.

Girls were more likely than boys to join 4-H to try new things, while boys were more likely to have joined 4-H because parents signed them up. Youth in sixth grade and over were less likely to have joined 4-H because parents signed them up than younger respondents.

### Why Youth Stayed in 4-H

Youth were asked to select from a list of nine reasons about why they stayed in 4-H. Some but not all of the reasons paralleled questions about reasons for joining. The following reasons were selected by a majority of youth as a reason why they stayed as long as they did: liked being with other kids (79%), had fun (76%), learned new things (72%), parents wanted them to stay involved (67%). Liked the 4-H club leaders (63%), enjoyed working on projects and participating in fairs and events (61%), community service projects (56%), awards and recognition (55%). Only teaching others was selected by less than half of the youth (40%). Less than 5% of youth wrote in another reason not on the list and these were mostly about specific activities, meeting others, and the fair specifically.

When comparing reasons for staying between grade level groupings, only one significant relationship emerged: sixth through eighth graders were far less likely to have stayed in 4-H because they liked their 4-H club leaders than either youth in fifth grade and under or youth in ninth grade and above. There were no significant differences between boys and girls.

### Reasons Youth Left the 4-H Program

Youth were also given a list of thirteen possible reasons for leaving and asked to select all of the reasons why they left 4-H. The primary reasons youth left the 4-H program in 2008 were because they lost interest in 4-H (47%) or became involved in other activities (47%). Secondary reasons included friends were not in 4-H (31%), they did not learn as much as expected (28%), or they did what they wanted to do in 4-H, such as met goals or participated in desired activities (26%). Still fewer youth reported they did not get enough help in 4-H (20%), did not feel welcomed (17%), were prohibited by barriers (14%), were not able to help others (10%), did not get to make choices (10%) or participate in community service (5%). In a few cases the program was no longer offered (5%) or the youth moved (4%). Twenty-nine youth (13%) wrote in other responses, with poor meeting environment and busy schedule being the most common.

When looking at grade differences, only one reason was found to have significant differences: youth in ninth grade and over were less likely than eighth grade and under to leave 4-H because they were not getting enough help. No significant relationship between reasons for leaving and gender was found.

### Relationships Between Reasons Youth Stayed and Reasons Youth Leave

In examining 117 possible combinations between the nine reasons for staying and thirteen of the reasons for leaving, twenty-five significant relationships were found (21% of those tested). These are summarized below based on the five main reasons youth stated for staying.

When youth indicated they stayed in 4-H because they had fun, they were less likely than other youth to leave because

- Their friends weren't in 4-H (35% vs. 56%),
- They didn't feel welcomed at club meetings (16% vs. 52%),
- They didn't get enough help (20% vs. 44%), or
- They lost interest in 4-H (56% vs. 77%).

Youth that stayed because they learned new things were significantly less likely than other youth to leave because they

- Did not feel welcomed at club meetings (18% vs. 35%),
- Did not get enough help (20% vs. 42%), or
- Did not get to choose what to do (9% vs. 24%).

If youth stayed in 4-H because they enjoyed working on projects and participating in fairs and events, they were *less likely* to leave than other youth because they

- Lost interest in 4-H (51% vs. 78%)
- Didn't get enough help (19% vs. 37%) or
- Had no choice in what to do (7% vs. 25%).

However, they were *more likely* to leave because they had already done what they wanted to do in 4-H (41% vs. 23%).

When youth stayed in 4-H because they liked teaching others about things they know how to do, they were *less likely* than other youth to leave because they lost interest in 4-H (44% vs. 72%) but *more likely* than others to leave because they

- Were not able to teach others (20% vs. 9%), or
- Already did what they wanted to do (43% vs. 27%).

If 4-H members stayed because they liked their 4-H leader(s), they were less likely to leave because they

- Didn't feel welcomed (13% vs. 46%),
- Didn't learn as much as expected (32% vs. 58%), or
- Didn't get enough help (19% vs. 41%).

These results suggest that there are some logical connections between why youth stay and why they ultimately leave 4-H. More will be said about this in the implications section.

Tables 1 and 2 examine the same results but look for differences between those who chose the different reasons why youth left 4-H. Interestingly, two reasons for leaving had more significant relationship with reasons youth stayed than any of the others. Youth who left 4-H either because they didn't get enough help (Table 1) or lost interest (Table 2) had both similar and some different reasons for staying in 4-H for as long as they did.

As Table 1 shows, youth who left because they did not get enough help were less likely to have reported staying because they had fun, learned new things, liked the club leaders, enjoyed working on projects and participating in fairs, and like awards and recognition. Interestingly, this was the only relationship between staying for awards and recognition and any reason for leaving. Perhaps if one feels one is not getting enough help they are also not likely to be getting rewards and recognition that might entice them to stay.

**Table 1**  
Differences in Reasons for Staying Among Youth Who Left 4-H  
Because They Didn't Get Enough Help

Reason youth stayed in 4-H	% of all youth who stayed in 4-H for this reason	% of youth who left because they didn't get enough help in 4-H but stayed for THIS reason	% youth who left because they didn't get enough help in 4-H but stayed for OTHER reasons
I had fun	76%	20%	44%
I learned new things	72%	20%	42%
I liked the club leaders	63%	19%	41%
I enjoyed working on projects and participating in fairs	61%	19%	37%
I liked the awards and recognition I achieved and worked toward	55%	19%	33%

As Table 2 indicates, youth who left because they lost interest were less likely to have stayed in 4-H because they had fun, learned new things, took part in projects and fairs, did community service, and were able to teach others.

Finally, among youth who left 4-H because they lost interest, they were also more like to leave because friends were not in 4-H, they were not welcomed, they did not learn, did not get to make choices or were in other activities. In some ways, losing interest may result from the other reasons for leaving.

**Table 2**  
Differences in Reasons for Staying Among Youth Who Left 4-H  
Because They Lost Interest

Reason youth stayed in 4-H	% youth who stayed in 4-H for this reason	% of youth who left because they lost interest in 4-H but stayed for THIS reason	% youth who left because they lost interest in 4-H but stayed for OTHER reasons
I had fun	76%	56%	77%
I learned new things	72%	56%	77%
I enjoyed working on projects participating in fairs	61%	51%	78%
I liked doing community service	56%	48%	82%
I liked teaching others things I know how to do	40%	44%	72%

### Implications

Study findings provide valuable information to inform youth development staff as they create plans to improve retention in 4-H club and other youth-serving programs. An understanding of why youth join, stay, and leave a program, and especially the significant relationships found between reasons for staying and leaving, suggest the need for greater awareness around different subgroups of participants. Focusing on the cluster of reasons for staying involved as well as leaving is a potentially fruitful way to increase retention.

Opportunities to increase youth program retention must be addressed at all levels of an organization. 4-H club experiences are primarily delivered by volunteers, and therefore volunteer training and support receives key consideration in identifying strategies to encourage youth to stay in the program.

### Strengthening project learning

Project learning is foundational to the 4-H program. Seventy-two percent of youth indicated they stayed in 4-H because they learned new things, and others left because they lost interest (47%) or because they did not learn what they expected to (28%). Programs can look at access to projects experiences, reflection, and sharing knowledge as ways to strengthen learning in 4-H.



Youth should be offered a variety of learning and leadership opportunities in multiple ways that support developing individual interests and potential. Volunteer training provided on how to support youth project learning, including how to understand what youth want to learn and how best to support them, will help achieve this.

Strengthening the reflection component of the experiential learning process brings out the learning. Tools can be shared with staff and volunteers to support reflection and evaluation of 4-H meetings, activities, and events. The organization can provide resources for staff and volunteers to strengthen the project and exhibition experience for youth.

Teaching others protects against losing interest, so focusing on developing mastery in youth that includes a component of sharing what they've learned with others should be implemented. Current options for teaching at local and state levels should be assessed with the organization providing volunteers with tools to assist youth in creating opportunities for teaching.

### Developing positive relationships with adults and peers

Youth reported that relationships with friends (79%) and club leaders (63%) were vital reasons for staying in 4-H. Youth that liked their club leaders tended to view their experience as welcoming, learning, and supported. Organizations need to provide volunteers with tools and resources to create and strengthen a welcoming environment for 4-H clubs, 4-H project meetings, activities, and events. Staff and volunteers that are strengthening and creating a welcoming environment for 4-H youth should be recognized with examples shared across the system.

Youth left the 4-H program because their friends were not in 4-H (31%). To promote continued participation, volunteers should foster friendships within the 4-H club, project meeting or county experience. Programs should explore ways for 4-H youth to integrate friends who are not members into their 4-H experience.

### Increasing the level of enjoyment

Is 4-H fun? The data says that nearly one quarter of respondents said "no." Although fun has a personal definition and perception for each individual, this is often part of the marketing strategy to potential members and families. Results indicated that youth did stay in 4-H because they enjoyed projects, fairs and events (61%).

Volunteers in leadership roles need to understand and practice providing a variety of activities and events for youth members, including involving youth in club leadership. This can be accomplished by ensuring youth provide input when decisions are made regarding organizational management, educational activities, events and recreation.

Long-established activities at all levels of the organization need to be re-evaluated from time to time to retain their vitality. Youth and adult volunteers should have the opportunity to reflect on how "fun" 4-H activities and events are, so their experiences provide insights as to whether or not change is needed. Staff and volunteers must understand what youth want to learn in order to insure a variety of opportunities are provided to addresses current personal interests of youth.

## Conclusion

Paying attention to factors that are significantly related to reasons for staying in 4-H—increased project learning, positive relationships with adults and peers, and fun programs—is important to



retaining youth in the program. The analysis of data suggest that if these changes are made in 4-H, significant strides will be made in keeping youth in programs.

## References

Astroth, K.A. (1985). The challenge of retaining 4-H members, *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 29(1).

Ferrari, T.M., & Turner, C.L. (2006). An exploratory study of adolescents' motivations for joining and continued participation in a 4-H afterschool program. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 44(4).

Little, P.M.D., Wimer, C., & Weiss, H. (2008). *After school programs in the 21st century: Their potential and what it takes to achieve it* (Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation Brief No. 10). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

Marsh, H.W., & Kleitman, S. (2002). Extracurricular school activities: The good, the bad, and the nonlinear. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72 464-514.

Posner, J.K., & Vandell, D.L. (1999). After-school activities and the development of low-income urban children: A longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology*, 35(3), 868-879.

Ritchie, R.M., & Resler, K.M. (1993). Why do youth drop out of 4-H. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 31(1).

Rhodes, J. (2004). The critical ingredient: Caring youth-staff relationships in after-school settings. In G.G. Noam (ed.), *After-school worlds: Creating a new social space for development and learning* (*New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 101, pp. 145-161). New York: Wiley.

Shortt, J. (2002). Out-of-school time programs: At a critical junction. In G.G. Noam & B.M. Miller (Eds.), *Youth development and after-school time: A tale of many cities*. (*New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 94, pp. 119-124). New York: Wiley.

Weiss, H.B., Little, P.M.D., Bouffard, S.M. (2005). More than just being there: Balancing the participation equation. *New Directions for Youth Development*, no. 105, pp. 15-31. New York: Wiley.