Making the Connection

The 4-H Program allows youth to “learn by doing.” The experiential learning model developed by Kolb (1984) and modified by 4-H includes five steps in the learning process:

1. Participants **experience** the activity - perform or do it.
2. Participants **share** the experience by describing what happened to them.
3. Participants **process** the experience to determine what was most important and identify common themes and experiences.
4. Participants **generalize** from the experience and relate it to their daily lives.
5. Participants **apply** what they learned to a new situation.

When this model is used, youth both experience and process the activity. They learn from thoughts and ideas about the experience. Each step contributes to their learning.
Providing an experience alone does not create experiential learning. Experiences lead to learning if the participant understands what happened, sees patterns of observations, generalizes from those observations and understands how to use the generalization again in a new situation. 4-H curriculum and materials for both youth and volunteers includes experientially based activities. Advantages of using the experiential learning process in group settings include:

1. The helper quickly assesses the youth’s knowledge of the subject.
2. The helper builds on the experience or knowledge.
3. The youths learn from each other by sharing knowledge and skills.
4. The helper is a coach rather than an up front teacher.
5. The youth relate the experience to their own lives and experiences.
6. Helpers may use a variety of methods to involve the youth in the experience and processing of it.
7. Youth with many different learning styles can be successful.
8. Discussions move from the concrete to the abstract and analytical.
9. Stimulates youth to learn through discovery and draw meaning from the experience.
11. Youth work together, share information, provide explanations and evaluate themselves and others.
12. Youth take responsibility for their own learning.

Selecting the Life Skill to be Taught and Practiced

One of the primary goals of the 4-H program is to help youth develop important life skills that they can use everyday. Life skills are tools youth (and adults) use to cope with daily circumstances, make important decisions and enhance the quality of their daily lives. Life skills help youth become competent, capable and contributing individuals. These skills can be seen in the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks 1996) on page 3.

When the 4-H program began, the purpose was primarily to teach youth project skills such as how to raise corn, livestock and vegetables as well as how to cook a meal. Today the primary goal of 4-H is youth development. Projects are used as a way for youth to practice and learn life skills. Strong project experiences are essential. Today a variety of methods are used to involve the youth in the experience so they practice important life skills as they explore the project. For example to teach decision making skills youth actually practice decision-making skills and discuss how they used them.

A well-designed activity may provide opportunities to practice several of the life skills shown on the clover. However, in order to help youth process what they have practiced, one life skill should be targeted and emphasized.

4-H programs concentrate on helping young people acquire life skills. Life skills are developed as a member learns a “skill”. There is a difference in a skill and a life skill. A “skill” is a learned ability to do something. “Life skills” are the ways we apply the information learned to real life situations.

The Targeting Life Skills Model developed by Iowa State University Extension (1996) targets life skills in a bull’s-eye – aiming 4-H youth toward life skills
development using the four H’s of the Clover. A well-balanced 4-H experience for the individual, club, activity or event will focus equally on all four quadrants of the model.

In designing an educational experience, it is suggested that the parent, volunteer or educator select and focus on one skill from each quadrant and integrate it into the subject matter content. The key to “life skills” development is the individual having an opportunity to talk about (reflect) and apply an experience to other aspects of their life. Example – How is following directions for a recipe and measuring ingredients applicable to other experiences in life?
Choosing a Method
Many teaching methods can be adapted to almost any subject matter. The methods depend upon the learners, the life skills targeted and the way the learners can become involved with the content. The method selected should be one that allows the youth to learn-by-doing, discover, practice the life skills and project skills targeted for the activity and have fun. The subject matter or topic usually doesn't limit the choice of a method, the life skill to be practiced will. If the intent is to have the youth practice decision-making, then the method needs to provide opportunities to practice decision making as they explore the subject matter. Here are some popular methods used in 4-H to promote life skill development. Following each method is one or more life skills that could be targeted with the method.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHOD</th>
<th>LIFE SKILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playing a game</td>
<td>Team work, risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving a presentation</td>
<td>Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judging activities</td>
<td>Communicating, decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning activities</td>
<td>Teamwork, planning, leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Playing</td>
<td>Communications, relating to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiments</td>
<td>Decision making, problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing others</td>
<td>Communications, relating to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solving a problem</td>
<td>Decision making, problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making models and products</td>
<td>Problem solving, leadership, utilizing resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning a skill</td>
<td>Many life skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 4-H program has a long history of helping youth "learn by doing." Methods like lectures and demonstrations that are often used in formal school settings do not support experiential learning. Rather than being an up-front teacher, teaching the youth what you want them to know or do, you help them learn by guiding the learning experience. You become a facilitator or coach. You involve the youth in ways they can discover for themselves instead of being put into a position of attempting to repeat what they have been told or shown. When the experiences are carefully designed, safely executed and thoughtfully processed, you provide tremendous potential for youth development and growth.

Processing the Experience
Debriefing the experience is what moves an experience beyond "learning-by-doing." The primary purpose of debriefing is to allow participants the opportunity to integrate their learning. They have a sense of closure or completeness to their experience. In order for youth to take what they have just experienced and use it effectively in their everyday lives, they must think about it and interpret it's meaning for themselves (Hammel 1986).
As the volunteer of the group you can assist in this process by:
1. Setting aside enough time to reflect on the experience(s).
2. Asking the right questions.
3. Planning appropriate activities that will help youth reflect on their experiences.
4. Listening to the youth carefully.
5. Supporting each youth’s unique learning.

The reflection and application steps of the experiential learning model help expand the learning potential. Each of the four reflections and application steps of the model comes to life when the helper asks appropriate questions to generate discussion and youth self-discovery. Each step should be explored before moving to the next step in relation to both the project skill and the life skill.

A learning/teaching process is composed of 5 separate but interrelated steps. The process begins with an individual or group learning exercise and ends with discussion of how what was learned can be applied to other settings in the “real world.”

The questions asked following the experience are critical. If the questions help youth explore the activity from their own perspectives, generalize to their own lives and see how to apply what they learned, then the goal has been reached. However, if the questions are perceived by the participants to be an oral test of their knowledge, then much of the benefits of using the experiential model are lost.

The following are examples of generic questions for each step of the experiential cycle.

Share
What did you do?
What did your group do when...?
What did you see? Feel? Hear? Taste?
What was most difficult? Easiest?
Process
What problems or issues seemed to occur over and over?
What did you learn about (life skill or activity subject matter) through this activity?
Why is the life skill you practiced important?

Generalize
What similar experiences have you had (with this life skill or subject matter)?
What similar challenge/problem/feeling have you faced? What did you do then?

Apply
How does what you learned relate to other parts of your life?
How can you use what you learned?
How can you apply (the life skill you practiced) in the future?

As you facilitate processing the experience you will want to be very aware of the stage or step of the experiential model currently being discussed and how ready the group is to move to the next step. This will depend on the needs and abilities of the group.

Asking the right questions is itself a skill to be learned. Sometimes a short activity in which everyone answers the same questions or simply finishes a sentence will get everyone focused. Finishing a statement like "I learned that..." or "I felt..." will stimulate discussion. You may want to form pairs or trios to discuss something and then have them share with the group the main points they discussed. Remember to move with the participants. Adjust based upon the responses they give. Continue to help them build on their experiences.

Evaluating the Project Activity
The most important question is whether the group members can show they have gained new knowledge and practiced the life skill and the project skill. The success indicator in the activity outline should describe an observable behavior or attitude change for both the project skill and life skill. For example a success indicator like "Youth will use one or more steps of the decision making model to solve the situation (project related)."

The questions discussed in the processing and application steps of the experiential model will often provide excellent feedback. Even better evaluation information can be gathered by having the group apply what they have learned to another situation. If you use experiential learning successfully some of the most important results will only happen as youth apply new skills in their everyday lives.

The example below illustrates specific skills a young person working in the Health and Foods and Nutrition project might develop through service or project work. In the middle column you can see that a specific skill will develop complementary life skills which in turn have application to real life situations outside of the 4-H project or activity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Life Skill</th>
<th>Application to Real Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying and meeting a need. Proper exercise and healthy food choices.</td>
<td>Service Learning</td>
<td>Developing and carrying out a systematic plan for a community or social need. Choosing to exercise and eat right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of surroundings and individuals. Recognizing the need for using will power.</td>
<td>Concern for Others</td>
<td>Social awareness and responsibility to community, work and family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing, communicating, reporting, teaching, evaluating. Cleanliness - personal hygiene and food handling.</td>
<td>Marketable Skills</td>
<td>Productive work skills for business and family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to make healthy food, exercise, and social decisions. Washing hands, brushing teeth, stretching before exercise.</td>
<td>Healthy Lifestyle Choices</td>
<td>Living as a role model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease Prevention</td>
<td></td>
<td>Taking preventive measures to decrease the likelihood of obesity and disease.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for better living in their clubs, communities, country and world.

Adapted from an article written by: Thomas D. Zurcher, Ph.D. Center for 4-H Youth Development U of Minnesota Exploring Experiential Learning Model, 12/2000

References