

Unit 5: Competition

4-H holds many competitive events. The Missouri 4-H philosophy regarding competition will be addressed in this important unit.

Learning objectives:

1. You will understand the historical significance of competition in 4-H.
2. You will understand the Ends Focused and Mastery Focused approaches to competition.
3. You will explore strategies to help youth develop mastery skills.

Preview questions:

1. In the early years of Extension, what audience was identified as reluctant to change agriculture practice? In society today, is there an audience that tends to be reluctant to change?
2. What is one difference between Ends Focused and Mastery Focused approaches to competition?
3. Name one strategy you can use to help a member be successful in their 4-H project work.
4. Name three life skills we hope participants will learn in competitive events.

Competition has been used as a teaching method since the early years of Extension. As described in Unit 1 (History), Extension agents set up corn growing competitions as a method to reach adults through their children who were enrolled in club work. Youth, who tended to be more open to change, used the new agricultural techniques to grow an acre of corn right next to their father's. As the yields were figured for the corn contest, the child's crop often out-yielded their father's. What was the result? Using this competitive approach, the new agriculture practices were often adopted by the adults. Do these competitive strategies apply to 4-H today? If you said "yes" to this question, you are right; however, the main purpose of 4-H is to help young people learn life skills, not win first place in project events.

One of the most frequent and most contentious discussions between Missouri 4-H program staff, volunteers and parents involves the topic of competition between individual youth trying to reach status as a 1st place winner. This module explains two distinct approaches to youth competition in 4-H: The Ends Focused approach and the Mastery Focused approach.

Ends Focused Approach

In the Ends Focused approach to competition, members place more value on winning the prize than performing the task well. There are winners and losers often characterized by comparison with fellow members, clubs, or counties. In the Ends Focused approach, the goal would be for one member to win over another member. For example, one member's cake is made better than another or one lamb has a better showing than another. A group example would be a high school football team whose goal is to beat the town rival. While there is nothing wrong with wanting to win, it is possible for members to achieve the goal (to win) without even doing their best!

When winning or getting the award is the focus in competition and members lose, they may experience negative consequences. For example, they may feel undeserving and give themselves negative messages, leading to lower self-esteem.

The Mastery Focused Approach - a positive alternative!

The alternative Mastery Focused approach helps make the best better. This approach is sometimes referred to as a task oriented approach, because it emphasizes learning to perform skills and giving 100 percent to the task at hand. Unlike the Ends Focused approach, goals are personal and not likely to include comparisons with others. Members compare their current performance to their own previous performances. Self-improvement is the targeted goal, and youth themselves are responsible for success or failure to achieve their goal. The Mastery Focused approach encourages youth and parents to focus on learning to perform skills to the best of one's ability. Winning is secondary.

There is no doubt that using the Mastery Focused approach in competitive 4-H events may be more difficult and even feel unnatural. Our society sends daily messages that emphasize winning at all costs. However, our approach to competition can change with insight and maturity. Vince Lombardi, one of the most successful coaches in the history of football, once said, "Winning isn't everything – it's the only thing." Mr. Lombardi later changed his widely quoted statement to, "Winning isn't everything - but striving to win is." We wholeheartedly support Mr. Lombardi's revised quote that encourages striving to win as a model. It is MASTERY that promotes positive life skills that last for a lifetime! Besides, most kids enjoy friendly competition.

A commonly stated example of the 4-H philosophy is, "A blue ribbon 4-H member with a red ribbon project is better than a red ribbon 4-H member with a blue ribbon project." Permit youth to determine their own involvement in age appropriate competition. Some members may practice their public speech or shooting their gun every day in preparation for the contest while others may be less intense with preparation. Some youth may choose not to compete at all. Preparation intensity should be the member's choice. If the youth becomes disappointed with the outcome of a contest, you have a teachable moment. Instead of saying, "I told you so," it is better to ask, "What would you have done differently?"

A staff member once heard a parent encourage their teen to warm up their horse in the arena before the show. The teen, who had been practicing outside in a round pen, responded, "The horse is ready." When the horse got in the arena, it spooked at a stream of light coming through the barn door. This was a teachable moment, and a wise parent might have asked, "What did you learn?" rather than saying, "I told you so."

Provide a variety of competitive choices.

Most 4-H contests have built in competitive choices. If your activity does not have those choices, consider adding them so the youth have several options from which to choose in order to excel.

Help youth choose responsibility.

Youth can develop an attitude that they are individually responsible for their actions and have control over their views about competition.

Additional tips:

- Give feedback information to the youth in a one-to-one setting.
- Being a positive role model.
- Keeping expectations realistic, taking into account the child's total development (social, physical, cognitive and emotional).
- Focusing on development of individual skills and abilities, not final scores.
- Playing with, supporting, and assisting youth. Do not compete with them or through them.
- Discussing what was learned. Young people need and want specific feedback on their projects and exhibits. The recognition of their efforts in their project work gives immediate feedback and has reinforcement value.

Remember a time when your child came home from a competitive event that you were unable to attend. How many of us asked questions that encouraged Ends-Focused responses such as:

- "Did you win?"
- "What was the score?"
- "How did you place?"

Tip: Most of the questions above are examples of closed-ended questions, which encourage a short or single-word answer. An open-ended question encourages a full, meaningful answer using the youth's own knowledge and feelings. Open-ended questions also tend to be more objective and less leading than closed-ended questions.

- Open-ended questions typically begin with words such as "Why" and "How", or phrases such as "Tell me about...". Often they are not really a question, but a statement which intentionally asks for a response. "What ribbon did you get?"
- We should strive to ask questions that draw out Mastery Focused responses such as:
- "Did you meet your goals? How did you meet your goals?"
- "Tell me about what you learned?"
- "What was one thing you will always remember about the event?"
- "If there was one thing you would change about your preparation, what would it be and why?"

4-H strives to develop youth, not things. The Mastery Focused approach encourages development of youth. Asking a youth, "What goal did you accomplish?" can serve as both an ends and mastery of question.

Competitive events are part of our culture. There are teaching methods 4-H leaders can use to make the competitive experience developmentally valuable. Be positive and praise youth for participating. To participate for the love of the activity and to strive to win is more important than actually winning.