Beyond Ready

4-H Program Tip Sheets
BELONGING

High-Quality Youth Development Programs That Promote Readiness

As shown in the Beyond Ready Framework, readiness for work and life begins with high-quality youth development programs that include a focus on belonging. A sense of belonging is a cornerstone of high-quality 4-H programming because youth grow to their full potential when they feel accepted, valued, and safe being themselves. When youth experience belonging, they are more likely to participate fully, take positive risks, and stay engaged over time. In 4-H settings, this means creating environments where every young person knows they matter—where their presence is noticed, their voice is welcomed, and their contributions are respected. Belonging is not just about being included; it is about feeling connected to caring adults and peers who genuinely want you to be there.

Belonging also supports learning and growth. Youth who feel secure and accepted can focus, try new skills, and persevere through challenges. When young people feel isolated or unsure whether they fit in, their energy often shifts toward self-protection rather than learning. 4-H programs that build strong relationships, encourage teamwork, and create shared experiences help youth develop confidence and a desire to learn.

For 4-H leaders and professionals, fostering belonging means paying attention to everyday interactions. Small actions—learning names, inviting input, celebrating effort, and setting clear expectations for kindness and respect—send powerful messages about who belongs. When leaders model openness and respect, youth learn to do the same.

Belonging also strengthens the long-term success of 4-H programs. Young people who feel they belong are more likely to return, bring friends, and step into leadership roles. Strong relationships with adults and peers reinforce positive behavior and sustained engagement. By prioritizing relationships and teamwork, 4-H leaders ensure their programs remain welcoming, supportive places where youth can grow, contribute, and succeed.



When working with 4-H youth:

- Learn and use their names. Saying names correctly builds connection and shows youth they are seen and valued.
- Co-create group norms with youth so everyone knows how members should treat one another. Revisit these norms regularly, not just at the start of the year.
- Ensure all youth have a voice by using strategies like small-group discussions, turn-taking, or written reflections so quieter youth can share ideas and be heard.
- Ask simple check-in questions like “How’s your week going?” or “What’s been challenging lately?” to show care and notice when someone may be feeling left out.
- Review games, schedules, language, and expectations through a youth-centered lens. Ask: Who might feel left out, and how can we adjust?
- Treat every young person with warmth, curiosity, and respect. Youth notice how adults interact, and this sets the tone for how they treat one another.

TRY IT OUT!

Something You Should Know:

Youth pair up and take turns sharing one thing about themselves others might not know (a hobby, a strength, or a hope). Partners then introduce each other to the group using what they learned. This activity helps youth feel seen and valued beyond surface-level traits.

Group Agreements – Our Way:

Instead of adults setting rules, youth work together to create agreements about how they want to treat one another. Write the agreements in youth-friendly language and post them where everyone can see. Revisit them regularly and invite youth to reflect on how the group is doing.

Pass the Strength:

Youth sit in a circle. One person starts by naming a positive quality or contribution they've noticed in the person to their right. That person then does the same for the next. This builds peer recognition and helps youth see their value in the group.

Belonging Check-In:

At the start or end of a meeting, invite youth to share one word, number, or gesture that represents how connected they're feeling that day. This normalizes talking about belonging and helps leaders notice who may need extra support.

Shared Traditions Builder:

Ask youth to design a small tradition the group will repeat (a closing cheer, reflection question, or recognition). When youth help create it, the tradition becomes a shared experience that brings them together.

Spotlight the Group:

Instead of highlighting individuals, recognize the group for how they worked together, such as welcoming a new member, handling challenges respectfully, or sticking with a task. This reinforces that a strong group is built through shared effort.

Connection to Beyond Ready

BELONGING

Belonging isn't just about feeling included; it is a practical foundation for work and life readiness. When young people experience a group where they are known, valued, and expected to contribute, they are more likely to show up consistently, take healthy risks such as trying new skills, and stick with difficult tasks. Supportive relationships with caring adults and peers help youth learn to communicate, cooperate, and resolve disagreements respectfully, which are skills employers consistently need. A strong sense of belonging also builds confidence and self-management, as youth practice setting goals, following through, and handling feedback in a safe environment. Over time, these experiences strengthen resilience and responsibility and help young people develop a positive sense of who they are and how they can add value, preparing them to succeed in school, on the job, and in their communities.

NATIONAL 4-H COUNCIL

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