Beyond Ready

4-H Program Tip Sheets
DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

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 fostering developmental relationships between youth and adults. At their core, developmental relationships are strong, positive connections between young people and adults that help youth grow into capable, caring, and contributing members of their communities. These relationships aren't just about being nice or friendly; they're about truly investing in a young person's well-being and offering the right balance of support, challenge, and encouragement as they grow. In 4-H, these relationships are central to helping young people reach their full potential, both during their time in the program and long after.

Strong developmental relationships don't happen by accident; they're built through everyday interactions between caring adults and young people. They begin when adults show youth they matter by listening, encouraging them, and being someone they can count on. Growth happens when adults set high expectations and gently push youth to keep improving while helping them learn from mistakes along the way. Support is just as important, whether that means helping a young person work through a challenge, navigate something new, or stay focused on a goal. Strong relationships also make room for youth voice by inviting young people to share ideas, help make decisions, and step into leadership. Adults can also open doors by connecting youth to new people, places, and experiences that help them imagine what's possible for their future.

Young people who experience these kinds of relationships do better in school, make healthier choices, develop stronger social skills, and feel more connected to their communities. They gain confidence, learn to navigate challenges, and build the skills they need for adulthood. Intentionally building these relationships in 4-H programs creates supportive environments where youth feel valued, challenged, and motivated to grow.



When working with 4-H youth:

- Show youth you care by being dependable and fully present.
- Listen attentively, remember details, and ask questions so youth know they are valued and their experiences matter.
- Help youth set personal goals and challenge them to stretch beyond their comfort zones.
- Encourage youth to reflect on mistakes as learning opportunities, and balance challenge with support so they feel motivated, not overwhelmed.
- Assist youth in navigating challenges by brainstorming solutions together rather than giving direct answers.
- Offer resources, advocacy, or help with problem-solving when obstacles arise, while encouraging growing independence.
- Involve young people in decision making. Ask for their input, allow them to lead, and respect their perspectives. This builds confidence and leadership skills.
- Introduce young people to new ideas, experiences, and people who can inspire them.

TRY IT OUT!

Show young people they matter through listening, encouragement, and dependability.

Highs, Lows, and Hopes: Begin meetings with a quick check-in where youth share a positive moment, a challenge, and something they're looking forward to. Adults can model active listening and affirm each voice.

Strength Spotting: Intentionally notice and name strengths in youth during activities, such as persistence, creativity, teamwork, or leadership, to help youth feel seen and valued.

Push youth to keep improving while helping them learn from setbacks.

Challenge by Choice: Offer optional stretch challenges so youth can take risks at their own pace, with adults offering encouragement and supporting reflection afterward.

Mistake Stories: Have youth share age-appropriate stories about times they struggled or failed and what they learned, helping normalize mistakes as part of learning and growth.

Help youth overcome obstacles and stay on track toward their goals.

Goal Walk-Throughs: Have youth share a goal connected to their project or personal interests, break it into manageable steps, and identify ways you can support them.

One-Minute Mentors: Rotate brief one-on-one check-ins during meetings, offering encouragement and help with challenges as they arise.

Respect youth voice and involve them in decisions and leadership.

Youth-Led Moments: Have youth take turns leading a short activity, reflection, or discussion, with adults stepping back and offering support when needed.

Decision Circles: Invite youth into real planning decisions, such as for an event or project, and talk through options, trade-offs, and outcomes together.

Connect youth to new people, places, and experiences that open doors.

Connection Maps: Have youth map people, careers, or experiences they're curious about, and help them make at least one new connection.

Future Snapshot: Have youth imagine themselves a few years in the future and share what they're doing, while adults ask questions and suggest opportunities or resources to explore.

Connection to Beyond Ready

DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

In 4-H, it's often relationships that make the biggest difference. When young people experience strong, caring relationships with trusted adults, they build confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging. Adults who listen, encourage, set high expectations, and share responsibility help youth learn to communicate, solve problems, handle setbacks, and take initiative. Through these everyday interactions, young people begin to see themselves as capable and valued while also learning to work with others, make decisions, and explore new possibilities. These relationship-rich experiences prepare youth for the real-world demands of work, leadership, and life beyond the program.

NATIONAL 4-H COUNCIL

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