Beyond Ready

4-H Beyond Ready Youth Development

REFERENCE GUIDE



Revised March 2026

Beyond Ready

10M YOUTH

The goal of Beyond Ready is to help 10 million youth be ready for *work and life*.

Important Note: *This guide includes information focused on youth development and its connection to the Beyond Ready initiative. For additional resources — including toolkits, action planning guides, communications materials, events, and marketing tools — visit the Beyond Ready: Resources for Leaders webpage:*

4-H.org/resources/professionals/beyond-ready

Note: A 4-H.org log-in account is required to access this page.

A Reference Guide to Support 4-H Beyond Ready Programming

Without a doubt, 4-H has always helped prepare youth for work and life. But today's youth are facing social conditions and challenges that we could not have imagined even 10 years ago. By all accounts this fast-paced world of change will only continue, causing youth to face many uncertainties and unknowns as they transition to adulthood. This means that if we are going to continue to prepare young people for work and life, we must change and adapt our 4-H work to support them in new ways. The linear pathways to success that guided youth in years past no longer apply. There is no single route to success in work and life, and our job now is to help young people build their own unique pathway forward into adulthood. We must support youth in becoming Beyond Ready — prepared to plan and navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The goal of Beyond Ready is to help 10 million young people be ready for work and life by 2030. This is why the initiative is grounded in the science and practice of youth development This booklet provides a convenient reference guide to important resources and tools to help you design, implement, and evaluate 4-H Beyond Ready programs based on high-quality youth development practice.

Each entry contains a short description of the resource, why it is important for Beyond Ready, and how to use it in your programming. Included is information on where you can go to learn more and access the resource itself.

We hope you will keep this guide on hand to shape programs you develop for Beyond Ready. The guide can also be a helpful lens to review established programs through a readiness lens. While some of the entries may look familiar, please consider looking more closely to see if there are ways current programming can be improved for even greater Positive Youth Development (PYD) impact.

Let's use this guide to elevate our youth development practice in Beyond Ready. ***Together, we'll make the best even better!***

Acknowledgments

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Beyond Ready Framework: The Path to Beyond Ready



A larger version of this graphic is available in Appendix B (p. 30).

What This Is

The Beyond Ready Framework outlines how 4-H programs focused on work readiness, when combined with an intentional youth development focus, lead to youth being ready for both work and life.

Reading the framework from left to right:

1. **Readiness through 4-H begins with a high-quality youth development program context.** Research shows that four important elements must be present in high quality youth development programs — Sparks, Belonging, Developmental Relationships with adults, and Youth Engagement. These elements make up a high-quality youth development experience for 4-H participants (see page 10 for more information about high quality youth development settings).
2. **4-H provides programs that promote work readiness.** Youth can become ready for work through programs that promote content learning, build work skills, support college and career readiness, leadership development, and real-life work experiences. The transition to what happens after high school is more varied and complicated for youth than ever before, with multiple possibilities, complex social influences, and ever-present uncertainties about the future. 4-H needs to be **particularly intentional about providing programs that help youth identify and create a post-secondary plan and assist with helping them navigate it successfully.** By participating in 4-H Beyond Ready programs, youth develop important knowledge and skills that prepare them for success in the workplace.

3. **4-H provides programs that promote life readiness.** Helping young people be ready for work is not enough. Youth must also be ready for life, and this is where youth development comes in. Youths' social, emotional, and cognitive abilities, along with positive habits of mind and behaviors, are important qualities for lifelong success. The Beyond Ready Framework outlines six important life readiness areas: 1) personal integrity; 2) responsibility; 3) purpose; 4) caring and connection, 5) goal setting and management; and 6) growth mindset.
4. **Youth readiness is reflected in key 4-H program outcomes.** By building youth skills for work and life together at the same time 4-H Beyond Ready programs help youth develop the essential skills and attitudes they need for a lifetime, including leadership, problem-solving, critical thinking and technological skills. In addition, Beyond Ready youth possess skills that help them navigate the ever-changing world – such as persistence, flexibility, adaptability and creativity, all skills employers say are most needed for success in today's world
5. **The result is youth who are Beyond Ready.** Collectively, 4-H Beyond Ready efforts will result in a generation of 10 million youth who are ready for work and life. Youth who are healthy, productive, and engaged.

Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

The 4-H Beyond Ready initiative is intentionally grounded in youth development. This means that it is not enough to focus on youth work readiness alone, but to do so in the context of high-quality youth development programs. For example, youth can be prepared for aspects of work readiness, such as learning interviewing and resumé-building skills. When these skills are taught in the context of youth development programs, however, much more than the skills alone are being developed. High-quality programs go further by also developing important personal characteristics that contribute to success in work and life. The Beyond Ready Framework provides a roadmap for combining the development of practical skills with personal development when working with youth.

How to Use this Information

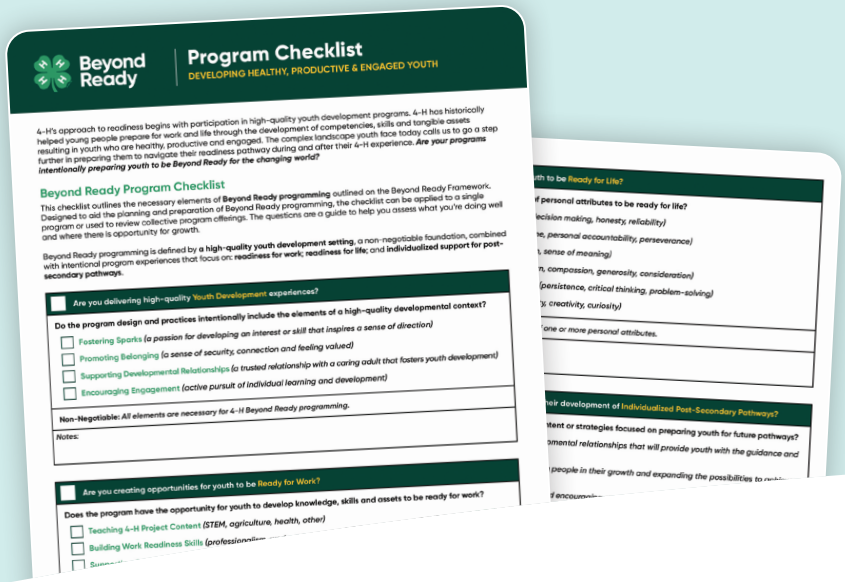
4-H Beyond Ready programs will vary across the country as each LGU focuses on its own priorities and approaches. The Beyond Ready Framework is a great resource for identifying ways to enhance existing work readiness programs to ensure they are taking place in a youth development context. It can also be used as new programs are developed. Using the framework to ask questions of a program is a good way to begin. Take, for example, an existing college exploration conference for teens; the framework can provide insight into how this program can be enhanced to foster one the ready for life skills more intentionally, like goal setting and management, or developed further to include an activity for youth to design a post high school–to-college action plan.

For More Information

Download the Beyond Ready Framework at:

www.4-h.org/resources/professionals/beyond-ready-resources-for-leaders/

Beyond Ready Program Planning Checklist


Beyond Ready

Program Checklist

DEVELOPING HEALTHY, PRODUCTIVE & ENGAGED YOUTH

4-H's approach to readiness begins with participation in high-quality youth development programs. 4-H has historically helped young people prepare for work and life through the development of competencies, skills and tangible assets resulting in youth who are healthy, productive and engaged. The complex landscape youth face today calls us to go a step further in preparing them to navigate their readiness pathway during and after their 4-H experience. ***Are your programs intentionally preparing youth to be Beyond Ready for the changing world?***

Beyond Ready Program Checklist

This checklist outlines the necessary elements of **Beyond Ready programming** outlined on the Beyond Ready Framework. Designed to aid the planning and preparation of Beyond Ready programming, the checklist can be applied to a single program or used to review collective program offerings. The questions are a guide to help you assess what you're doing well and where there is opportunity for growth.

Beyond Ready programming is defined by a **high-quality youth development setting**, a non-negotiable foundation, combined with intentional program experiences that focus on: **readiness for work; readiness for life;** and **individualized support for post-secondary pathways.**

Are you delivering high-quality Youth Development experiences?

Do the program design and practices intentionally include the elements of a high-quality developmental context?

- Fostering Sparks *(a passion for developing an interest or skill that inspires a sense of direction)*
- Promoting Belonging *(a sense of security, connection and feeling valued)*
- Supporting Developmental Relationships *(a trusted relationship with a caring adult that fosters youth development)*
- Encouraging Engagement *(active pursuit of individual learning and development)*

Non-Negotiable: All elements are necessary for 4-H Beyond Ready programming.

Notes:

Are you creating opportunities for youth to be Ready for Work?

Does the program have the opportunity for youth to develop knowledge, skills and assets to be ready for work?

- Teaching 4-H Project Content *(STEM, agriculture, health, other)*
- Building Work Readiness Skills *(professionalism,*

A larger version of this checklist is available in Appendix A (p. 28-29).

What This Is

This checklist outlines the necessary elements of Beyond Ready programming identified in the Beyond Ready Framework. Designed to aid the planning and implementation of Beyond Ready programming, the checklist can be applied to a single program or used to review collective program offerings. The checklist is a practical guide to help you assess what you're doing well and where there is opportunity for you to modify your program to increase alignment with Beyond Ready. The checklist walks you through each section of the Beyond Ready Framework using a series of questions and checkboxes to help you evaluate the match of your program with Beyond Ready.

High Quality Youth Development Experiences

Providing a high quality youth development experience is a non-negotiable aspect of Beyond Ready. Every program should have opportunities for youth to explore their spark, belong, be engaged, and experience developmental relationships with adults. Every box on this part of the checklist should be checked for your program to be Beyond Ready.

Ready for Work

4-H has lots of programs that help youth develop important skills for work. It is important to know that no one program has to cover everything on the checklist in this section. But for your program to be a match with Beyond Ready it is important that the program is intentional about building one or more of the ready for work items on this checklist.

Ready for Life

Similarly, not every skill listed on the ready for life checklist needs (or should!) covered by any given program. As you think about your program make sure that at least one of the ready for life opportunities are included. And most importantly, make an intentional plan for how it is present in your program. It is often too easy to assume that ready for life skills will develop because you check them off, but without an intentional plan for how they will be developed, there will likely be little impact on a young person's readiness for life skills.

Individualized Post-Secondary Pathways

Providing individualized post-secondary pathway planning and support is the most unique aspect of Beyond Ready program, and something that youth need help with now more than ever! The 2025 National 4-H Index Study revealed that pathway planning is an area where 4-H can provide even more opportunities for youth. Think about how your programs can be enhanced to provide this opportunities to all older youth.

Beyond Ready Outcomes

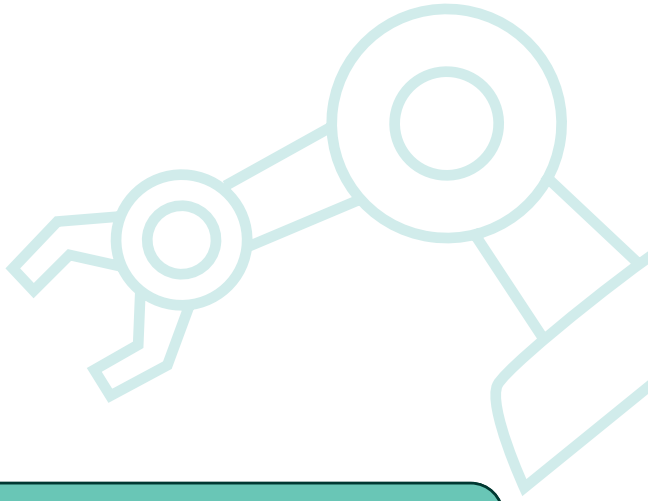
The goal of Beyond Ready is 10 Million youth who are ready for work and life by 2030. Ready youth are healthy, productive, and engaged. Use this portion of the checklist to identify which of the three outcomes your program seeks to intentionally impact.

Why it is Important for Beyond Ready

Because 4-H has a long history of helping youth be ready for work and life, it is easy to assume that you are already doing Beyond Ready programs. Supporting youth readiness and ensuring programming meets their needs requires increased intentionality. This program checklist can be used to ensure that any Beyond Ready program contains all the ingredients necessary to build youth readiness grounded in high-quality PYD.

How to Use this Information

Use this checklist as you develop new Beyond Ready programs, and for reviewing current programs to ensure they are intentionally designed to help youth be ready for work and life. Placing a check in the first row indicates that your program meets the criteria described in the second row. The third row provides guidance on how to incorporate each element into your program, followed by a section where you can make notes.



Learn More

Download the Beyond Ready Program Planning Checklist at:

www.4-h.org/resources/professionals/beyond-ready-resources-for-leaders/

Beyond Ready Framework: Growth Strategies

Expand New External Audiences

(Grow by 2 Million Youth)

4-H can reach new audiences by providing training, programming and curricula through new and enhanced external partnerships.

For example:

- Military
- K-12 Schools
- Outdoor education programs
- Community & youth organizations
- Faith-based organizations
- Homeschool coalitions
- Minority serving organizations (e.g., MANRRS)

Retain Youth in 4-H

(Grow By 1 Million Youth)

4-H can increase the number of youth it serves by retaining every youth that enters the program through high school.

For example:

- Create skill building 4-H programs from Cloverbuds to high school.
- Develop programs that transition 4-H members from middle school to high school.
- Develop a non-parent volunteer base (e.g., corporate/industry volunteers, 4-H young alumni).
- Develop programming that appeals to teens.
- Provide support for creating and navigating post-secondary pathways.

Engage Youth Virtually

(Grow by 1 Million Youth)

Clover by 4-H provides a platform for youth to explore curated readiness experiences and credentials at any time, allowing youth direct access to 4-H.

Other virtual and hybrid engagement opportunities may include:

- Virtual SPIN Clubs
- Online competitions
- Virtual career fairs
- Hybrid youth leadership programs
- Online certification courses

Expand New Internal Audiences

(Grow By 2 Million Youth)

4-H can reach new audiences by providing training, programming, and curricula through new and enhanced internal LGU partnerships.

For example:

- Jr. Master Gardeners
- Jr. Master Naturalists
- Campus-based youth programs
- Campus-based youth camps

What This Is

One aim of Beyond ready is to increase the number of young people who are ready for work and life through 4-H to 10 million by 2030. This will be accomplished through four growth strategies:

1. **Expanding participation in 4-H** through external, community-based partnerships.
2. **Retaining youth in 4-H** through high school.
3. **Engaging youth virtually** through Clover by 4-H and other virtual and hybrid engagement opportunities.
4. **Expanding participation in 4-H** through new partnerships within each land-grant university.

Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

In order to grow 4-H to 10 million youth by 2030, each land-grant university 4-H program will need to focus on increasing membership through one or more of these four growth strategies.

How to Use this Information

The four growth strategies should be used to inform Beyond Ready program development and monitor the growth of 4-H membership in your programs. As you develop new or enhance existing 4-H programs for Beyond Ready, be sure to determine how that programming effort — alongside increasing youth readiness — is also contributing to growth in the 4-H program.

Youth Program Quality: Beyond Ready begins here!



4-H Programming:
High-quality youth development programs that promote:

Sparks | Belonging | Relationships | Engagement

What This Is

Ensuring that youth are Beyond Ready depends on their participation in high-quality youth development settings. In fact, the results of the 2025 National 4-H Index Study revealed a strong correlation between the experience that youth have in 4-H and the outcomes they achieve. This is why we say that the quality of program settings for Beyond Ready is "non-negotiable." If you want your programs to have the biggest impact on youth, then you must be intentional about creating a high-quality program setting for youth.

Think of your program setting as the soil in which youth grow. And just like soil needs specific ingredients for a seed to germinate and flourish, youth need key elements to grow and be ready for work and life. A program setting in 4-H is any place where youth engage in a 4-H experience: a club meeting, a leadership camp, even a livestock weigh-in. Any time and any place we interact with youth in 4-H, we have the opportunity to ensure the experience promotes youth development.

Research has identified four critical elements that combine to create a high-quality 4-H experience for youth.

- Youth Sparks
- Belonging
- Developmental Relationships
- Youth Engagement

1. **Youth Sparks:** Youth sparks are the passions, interests, and talents that inspire and energize young people. When these sparks are recognized and nurtured, they can boost motivation, build confidence, and help youth discover their purpose. By exploring their sparks, young people develop essential life and work skills like problem-solving, communication, and perseverance. This self-awareness and personal growth not only prepares youth for future careers but also empowers them to lead meaningful lives. Helping youth identify and grow their sparks sets the stage for readiness in the future.
2. **Belonging:** The path to readiness through 4-H begins with belonging. Ensuring that all youth feel a sense of belonging is essential in any youth development program. If young people don't feel welcome or that they truly belong, they're more likely to disengage or drop out entirely. When youth do feel they belong, they feel safe and are more willing to trust the guidance of adults as they prepare for life beyond high school. Belonging reduces isolation and disconnection and fosters self-worth and mattering — foundations for purpose and a desire to contribute, both key indicators of readiness.

3. **Developmental Relationships:** Developmental relationships among youth and adults in 4-H are a key driver of youth readiness. The path to adulthood is more complex and uncertain than ever before. Youth today face many unknowns and uncertainties and rely on the help of adults to guide and support them. Youth in 4-H often experience positive relationships with adults, but not necessarily developmental relationships. According to Search Institute developmental relationships are defined by five critical qualities, all of which are foundational to ensuring youth readiness: Expressing Care, Challenging Growth, Providing Support, Sharing Power, and Expanding Possibilities.

4. **Youth Engagement:** The more a young person is engaged in 4-H, including a breadth of opportunities and experiences, the stronger outcomes we will see. 4-H experiences must be relevant and meaningful to youth or they won't stay in the program long. This is especially true when we are working with youth from childhood to edge of adulthood. Across time, the developmental needs and abilities of young people change dramatically, and so should the ways we engage them. Information on youth development, age-specific needs, and youth-adult partnerships can be found in this reference guide: *The Foundations of Youth Success* (p. 14), *Ages and Stages* (p. 16), and *Youth-Adult Partnerships* (p. 20).

Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

Ensuring that all programs are grounded in high-quality youth development practice is a non-negotiable aspect of Beyond Ready. Starting with youth development as the foundation means we are building readiness on a foundation of positive experiences that research shows are critical for achieving program outcomes. At first glance, the elements of high-quality youth development settings may seem obvious. For example, we all know that youth need to belong, and that relationships with adults are an important aspect of 4-H. But because these things appear obvious, it is easy to assume they are happening for every young person in every 4-H experience. If we are to help youth become Beyond Ready, we must pay careful attention to the quality of their 4-H experiences.

How to Use this Information

The experiences youth have in 4-H ultimately determine the impact of your efforts — so it's worth taking the time to ensure they're having the quality experience you intend. Use this information and the Beyond Ready Checklist to evaluate your program settings carefully: Does every youth experience belonging, a chance to explore their spark, and developmental relationships?

Beyond Ready for Life!

READY FOR LIFE

Promoting Personal Integrity
(ETHICAL DECISION MAKING, HONESTY, RELIABILITY)

Supporting Responsibility
(SELF-DISCIPLINE, PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY, PERSEVERANCE)

Fostering Purpose
(DIRECTION, MOTIVATION, SENSE OF MEANING)

Promoting Caring & Connection
(CONCERN, COMPASSION, GENEROSITY, CONSIDERATION)

Promoting Goal Setting & Management
(PERSISTENCE, CRITICAL THINKING, PROBLEM-SOLVING)

Encouraging a Growth Mindset
(ORIGINALITY, CREATIVITY, CURIOSITY)

What This Is

The goal of 4-H Beyond Ready is to develop a generation of young people who are healthy, productive, and engaged. Beyond Ready is grounded in youth development, an approach to programming that promotes youths' social, emotional, and cognitive abilities, as well as the development of positive habits of mind and behaviors important for lifelong success. These personal attributes and qualities are represented by the Ready for Life descriptions found in the Beyond Ready Framework.

1. **Promoting Personal Integrity.** Personal integrity is one of the most important qualities a young person can develop in 4-H. Youth who develop honesty, reliability, respect, and who make ethical decisions, develop a foundation for trust, responsibility, and strong relationships. These qualities help youth navigate challenges, work well with others, and make sound choices, all of which are essential for success in both adulthood and the workplace. Employers and communities rely on people who can be counted on to act with integrity and respect.
2. **Supporting Responsibility.** Developing self-discipline, accountability, and perseverance as a youth builds the ability to follow through on goals, manage responsibilities, and stay focused even when challenges arise. These habits translate directly into workplace success, where employers value people who can manage their time, own their actions, and keep going when things get difficult. They also strengthen everyday life by helping young people build healthy relationships, make good choices, and handle life's ups and downs with confidence.
3. **Fostering Purpose.** Purpose is an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is both personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world. Youth with a sense of purpose are also more likely to feel connected to others, and thus less lonely. Having a sense of purpose gives young people direction and motivation, helping them stay focused and resilient when facing challenges at work and in life. It also fosters hope and optimism, which support healthier relationships, stronger decision-making, and greater overall well-being.
4. **Promoting Caring and Connection.** Caring youth care about the feelings and needs of others, and to care and respond with empathy and compassion when others are in need. These skills form the foundation for healthy social development and support mental well-being. As adults, they translate into effective teamwork, leadership, and the ability to navigate diverse workplaces and life challenges with understanding and respect.

5. **Promoting Goal Setting and Management.** Practicing goal setting and management empowers youth to build persistence, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, all qualities that employers consistently rank among the most valuable. These abilities help young people confidently plan, take action, and adapt as they grow. They also fuel personal resilience and strengthen their ability to pursue big goals with purpose. Ultimately, these skills set youth up not just for career success, but for a fulfilling and self-directed adult life.

6. **Encouraging a Growth Mindset.** A growth mindset means that youth believe their abilities are not fixed in stone, but rather can get better with effort. Having a growth mindset enables youth to work hard at things that are difficult, because they know that with effort, they are able to accomplish many things. A growth mindset promotes important qualities such as originality, creativity, and curiosity, leading to flexibility, adaptability and innovation, qualities highly valued by employers. These qualities also help youth approach life with confidence and openness, enabling them to overcome challenges, pursue meaningful opportunities, and continually grow into their fullest potential.

Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

As highlighted in the Beyond Ready program framework, developing ready-for-life personal attributes is just as essential as building work-readiness skills. To truly prepare youth to be "Beyond Ready," every work-readiness program should intentionally support growth in one or more of these foundational qualities. When you integrate ready-for-life attributes alongside building practical career skills, you help nurture well-rounded young people who are equipped for success both now and throughout their lives.

How to Use this Information

If you're planning your Beyond Ready program from scratch, you can use the use the Beyond Ready Checklist to ensure your program is helping youth develop the important ready for life attributes that they need for success. If you already have work-ready programs in place, the checklist can help you evaluate where you might be more intentional in also supporting life readiness.

No matter where you are in your program development, remember: you don't have to include all six life-ready attributes at once. Your program may naturally support the development of one or two of the ready for life qualities more than others — and that's okay. In fact, it's likely.

Also keep in mind that the development of the ready for life attributes is a process — something that takes place over time as youth mature. It's unlikely that a single program will build every life-readiness quality all at once. But when each program is thoughtful and intentional about promoting the ready for life qualities it can support, together we help youth grow and become truly ready for life.

Learn More

For guidance on using the Ready for Life Attributes in program planning, see the Ready for Life Tip Sheets at:

www.4-h.org/resources/professionals/beyond-ready-resources-for-leaders/

Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework



What This Is

This framework was developed by the University of Chicago Consortium on Schools Research to promote the understanding that strong academic skills alone are not enough to help youth be prepared for a productive and fulfilling life. One of the most important contributions of this framework, however, is the identification of a developmental progression of how readiness comes online over childhood and adolescence, and the identification of key developmental steps that lead to readiness. This has two important implications for our readiness work:

1. **Aspects of readiness develop over time and build on one another — reinforcing the idea that readiness begins early.**
2. **Certain aspects of development come "online" at different stages of childhood and adolescence. This helps us identify where to best focus our programming efforts to support readiness development.**

In middle childhood (ages 6–10), which is roughly the age of 4-H Cloverbuds and Juniors, the developmental focus is on knowledge, skills, and self-regulation. This is a perfect match for younger youth in 4-H who are actively engaged in learning new things and developing self-regulation skills like the ability to focus attention and work well with others. As youth in this group grow, they will increasingly develop mindsets about their abilities. This means that in addition to what youth are learning, we should also pay attention to the mindsets they are forming as they learn. Imagine a 4-H youth who is struggling to complete a task. What mindset is emerging? Is it, "This is too hard, and I'm not good at it," or is it, "This is hard, but I know if I keep working at it, I will finish"? The first statement reflects a fixed mindset; the second, a growth mindset.

In early adolescence (ages 11–14), which is roughly the age of 4-H Intermediates, mindsets become a central developmental focus — alongside group-based identity. This is an ideal time to build a growth mindset through experiences that are challenging but achievable. Paying attention to the stories youth share about themselves can provide insight into their mindsets. It is also a time to support positive youth group-based identity through teamwork and group belonging. Throughout this time, values are beginning to come online, which means this is a great time to help a young person identify, build, and reflect on their positive personal values. For Example: value learning, teamwork, contribution and perspective taking.

In middle adolescence (ages 15–18), which is roughly the age of 4-H Seniors, the main developmental focus shifts to values. Who am I? What do I value and stand for? How are my values reflected in the choices that I make?

The successful development of knowledge and skills, self-direction, mindsets, and values across childhood and adolescence leads to readiness that is described by five key areas. These factors are another way we can describe a young person who is ready for work and life.

1. **Competencies:** The skills and abilities that youth learn in 4-H translate into the competencies they will need in adulthood. This includes knowledge learned in 4-H projects, as well as leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.
2. **Purpose:** Having a sense of purpose provides a source of hope and optimism about the future and leads to young adults who have a positive sense of self, and a desire to contribute to the world around them. All essential qualities of readiness.
3. **Agency:** Empowering youth agency through 4-H builds confidence and prepares them to navigate the opportunities and challenges of adult life.
4. **Social Connections:** Every youth needs a person or network of people that provides support and challenge growth. Forming and maintaining strong social networks are important across life, and 4-H can play a critical role in helping young people develop their social networks.
5. **Self Understanding:** Youth need to have a sense of how different aspects of themselves are woven together to form the "me" they are ready to take into the world. Ex. Skills, talents, experiences.

Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

The research that informed the Foundations for Young Adult Success Framework is extensive and provides important insight into the developmental process of readiness. It provides a more precise lens on the key aspects of readiness to focus on when working with youth of different ages in 4-H.

How to Use this Information

Readiness for work and life begins early! The information in this framework can be used to enhance program plans with different ages of youth and be intentionally included in program practice. Take, for example, a program for Cloverbuds — have you considered how it supports the development of self-direction through learning? Have you thought about how to foster a growth mindset with school-age youth, or how to promote values for teens? The beauty of this framework is its simplicity. By reflecting on how your program supports the development of the key developmental steps, you will be helping youth be Beyond Ready.

Learn More

Learn more and download the framework at:

consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/foundations-young-adult-success-developmental-framework

Check out the video "A Thought Leader Conversation with Dr. Camille Farrington " at:

youtube.com/watch?v=9BZYH1fUxzg

Ages and Stages of Youth Development

What This Is

Youth of different ages have unique skills, abilities, and developmental needs. Some differences, like physical development, are easy to spot — Cloverbuds are clearly smaller than teens. But other differences are less visible. For example, how youth take in, process, and understand information — these are called cognitive or intellectual differences. Social needs and preferences also shift as youth grow, and their ability to understand and manage emotions improves with age. The table below summarizes some of the key developmental differences in youth.

Developmental stage	Sample characteristics and how to plan for those characteristics	Implications for programming
Early childhood (ages 5-8)	Youth in this age group are still practicing large and small motor skills. They may not be physically able to complete some tasks, and others will be messy as they have a harder time manipulating materials.	**Physical:** Choose projects that can be successfully completed. Prioritize activities that include physical activity. **Intellectual:** Plan lots of shorter activities to fill the time. Be flexible. Allow opportunities for exploration and discovery. **Social and emotional:** Focus on cooperative activities that allow for group success. Assist and encourage frequently. Increase adult to youth ratio (one adult for every 3 to 4 youth). Offer lots of adult support.
Middle childhood (ages 9-11)	Youth in middle childhood have shorter attention spans and enthusiasm for trying new things. It is important to plan several shorter activities during program time rather than one longer activity.	**Physical:** Provide active learning experiences. Encourage large and small motor movement. **Intellectual:** Create multiple shorter learning experiences; give simple and short directions. **Social and emotional:** Create group learning experiences; allow group to work together to plan and manage time. Engage in mentoring experiences with older youth.
Young teens (ages 12-14)	Young teens have the skills to plan and evaluate their own work. Encourage these youth to take a larger role in planning activities.	**Physical:** Be aware that youth may feel embarrassed about changes. Find ways to normalize these changes through conversation, etc. **Intellectual:** Engage youth in activity planning and setting forth expectations. Provide opportunities to create their own solution and engage in predicting and problem solving. **Social and emotional:** Typical human development leads to drama and extreme feelings. Be open, accepting, understanding. Plan a variety of activities where lots of participants can be successful and recognized by others.

Adapted and used with permission from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension Positive Youth Development Institute.

Developmental stage	Sample characteristics and how to plan for those characteristics	Implications for programming
Middle teens (ages 15-17)	Youth at this stage are often interested in the well-being of the greater community. Adult facilitators can help them create opportunities to address some of these needs.	**Intellectual:** Engage in real-life problem-solving situations, allowing youth to take the lead in brainstorming, decision making, and evaluating outcomes. Plan civic and community service projects. Offer opportunities to explore schools, careers, and networking with college students and working adults. **Social:** Encourage teens to plan group activities and projects. Emphasize personal development when possible. **Emotional:** Allow teens to take on increased responsibility and opportunities for exploring one's values and beliefs.
Older teens/young adults (ages 18-19)	At this stage, youth are preparing for major life changes. They are thinking about moving out on their own, deciding what to do after they graduate, etc. Provide youth with opportunities to explore different options. Invite them to have conversations with adult sounding boards.	**Intellectual:** Help youth consider ways that these activities can continue into adulthood. **Social:** Be a resource for youth considering future plans. **Emotional:** Give recognition for leadership activities; club/group activities and rituals may no longer be fulfilling.

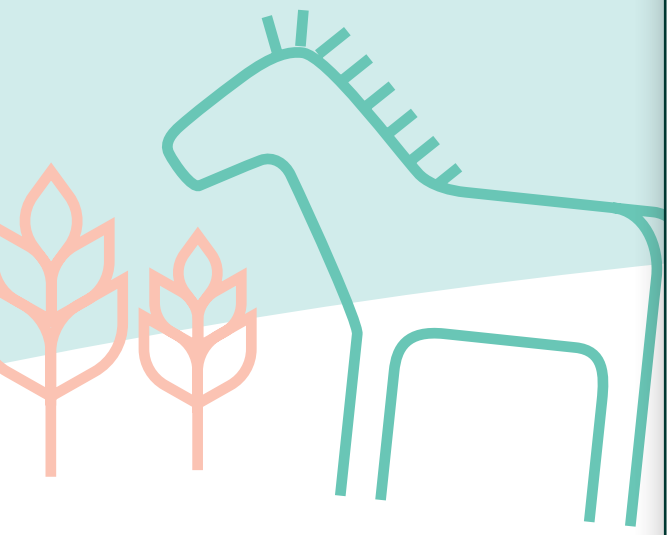
Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

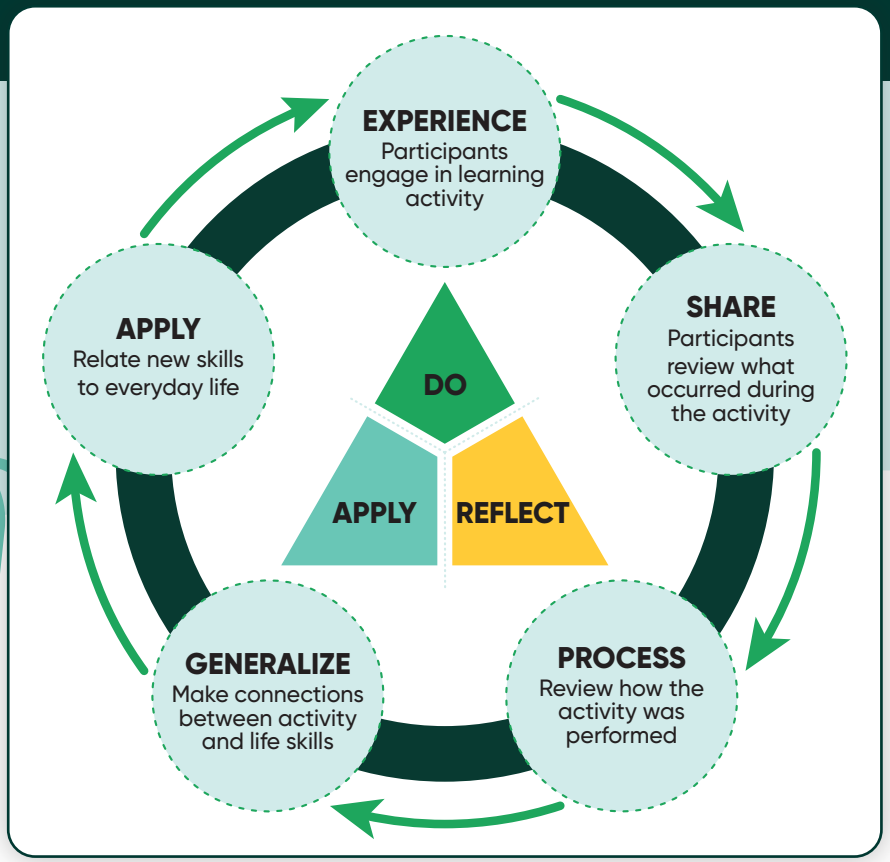
Beyond Ready growth strategies emphasize retaining youth in 4-H through high school, which means they'll likely move through multiple developmental stages during their participation. Understanding these ages and stages supports developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), helping 4-H experiences align with each young person's age, needs, and abilities. DAP promotes learning through play, exploration, and hands-on experiences. When implemented well, it fosters positive interactions that build youth confidence, curiosity, and a love of learning.

How to Use this Information

Ages and Stages information can be used in a number of ways to support the foundations of readiness at every age. Use the information to review your current practices. Are you paying attention to the developmental needs of youth in your programs? You can also use this information to support the development of Beyond Ready programming for youth of all ages to ensure you are building readiness based on the needs and abilities of youth at every age. Finally, use this information to train and support volunteers in their own understanding and use of developmentally appropriate practices.

Experiential Learning





Adapted from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension Positive Youth Development Institute. Used with permission.

What This Is

The science of learning and development is clear: Youth learn best through active learning that is fun and engaging, and includes opportunities for reflection on what is learned and how it applies to other parts of life. This type of learning is essential for meaning making with young people. 4-H has long followed a "learn by doing" approach with youth, and for many years has also used the Experiential Learning Model to guide learning. The Model outlines the steps of the learning process: **Do, Reflect,** and **Apply**.

- ***Do.*** This refers to the learning experience itself, where youth are actively engaged in hands-on learning. This type of learning can involve activities, experiments, or real-world simulations. Hands-on learning improves engagement in learning, as well as retention of what is learned.
- ***Reflect.*** The reflection step in the process consists of two parts: First, having youth ***share*** what happened during the activity. Second, having youth ***process*** the learning experience itself. When youth are guided through these steps using questions and observations, they begin to think more about what they learned.
- ***Apply.*** The application step helps youth take what they've learned and apply it to their own lives. This involves coaching youth to generalize their learning and recognize how it applies across different real-life situations. The goal is to help youth transfer new knowledge and skills into everyday life.

Why it is Important for Beyond Ready

Experiential learning plays a crucial role in preparing youth for both work and life by offering hands-on, real-world experiences that enhance practical skills and personal development. For example:

- **Developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills**
- **Building practical skills**
- **Fostering teamwork and collaboration**
- **Boosting confidence and independence**
- **Enhancing communication skills**
- **Encouraging adaptability and flexibility**
- **Promoting self-reflection and personal growth**

How to Use this Information

When developing and implementing 4-H Beyond Ready programs, it is important to ensure that youth are learning through active and engaging hands-on opportunities. Even more important than the learning experience itself is ensuring that all steps of the Experiential Learning Model are included in the experience. Taking the time to facilitate reflection and application of what is learned will not only help the learning "stick," it will also build many of the skills required of a ready generation.

Youth-Adult Partnerships

Authentic Decision Making

Natural Mentors

Reciprocity

Community Connectedness

What This Is

As shown in the information on Ages and Stages, as youth grow from childhood to adolescence, their needs for engagement in 4-H grow and change as well. One important change for teens is their increasing need for more independence and autonomy. The teen years are also a perfect time to encourage youth engagement in — and connection with — their communities. Along with this engagement comes opportunities for empowering youth to have their voices heard on issues that matter most to them. Providing opportunities for youth to experience youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) is a powerful way to keep youth engaged in 4-H through their teen years.

Research has revealed four core elements of Y-APs, based on the work of Zeldin, Christens, and Powers (2013).[1]

1. **Authentic Decision Making:** It is important to remember that adults often hold the power in decisions that affect youth. In Y-APs, youth voices are elevated, recognized, and included in decisions that affect them. When youths' voices are included, they begin to develop agency and confidence.
2. **Natural Mentors:** When youth experience Y-APs, they form support networks with multiple adults who can serve as natural mentors. Mutual respect, appreciation, and willingness to share power authentically are key to these relationships.
3. **Reciprocity:** Y-APs are grounded in the understanding that youth and adults bring different (and valuable) perspectives and experiences to the table. Reciprocity means that youth and adults are willing to learn from each other.
4. **Community Connectedness:** Y-APs play an important role in helping young people become more connected with their communities. This is often accomplished through community and civic engagement projects during which youth identify a concern that they want to address and work with their adult partners and other youth to create change. Building community connections increases a young person's social capital and sense of belonging.

[1]*Zeldin, S., Christens, B. D., & Powers, J. L. (2013). The Psychology and Practice of Youth-Adult Partnership: Bridging Generations for Youth Development and Community Change. American Journal of Community Psychology, 51(3–4), 385–397. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9558-y*

Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

Youth-adult partnerships develop life and work readiness in youth because they provide opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and real-world learning. Y-APs foster readiness through:

- **Mentorship and Guidance:** Adults serve as mentors, offering advice, insight, and feedback based on their experiences. This helps youth understand how to navigate challenges in both life and the workforce.
- **Skill Development:** Through real-world tasks and projects, youth can develop practical skills that are directly relevant to future careers. Adults can provide opportunities for hands-on experiences, encouraging youth to apply what they've learned to real-life situations.
- **Increased Confidence:** When adults support and trust youth in their abilities, it boosts their confidence and helps them take initiative. This builds self-esteem and self-efficacy, both of which are crucial for success in personal and professional settings.
- **Networking and Connections:** Adults often bring valuable connections and resources that can help youth explore career paths, gain access to job opportunities, and build a professional network.
- **Encouraging Responsibility:** By involving youth in decision-making and planning, Y-APs foster a sense of responsibility and accountability. Youth learn the importance of meeting deadlines, setting goals, and working collaboratively.
- **Youth Voice and Empowerment:** In a Y-AP, youth are not just passive recipients of guidance — they are active participants, offering their perspectives and ideas. This empowers them and makes them feel heard and valued, which is important for their overall development.

How to Use this Information

Intentionally developing youth-adult partnerships is one of the most impactful ways you can help youth be ready for work and life. Use this information to review current programs — especially with teens — or to develop new programs for Beyond Ready. How can you ensure that youth have the opportunity to experience Y-APs in your programs? Keep in mind that Y-APs are not one-on-one relationships between youth and adults, but rather take place in a group settings where multiple youth and adults work together.

National 4-H Index Study



What This Is

The National 4-H Index Study is an annual point-in-time survey of 4-H youth. Participation in the study is open to all land-grant university 4-H programs and provides an easy opportunity to learn about your LGU's program's quality, learning, and program impact. Measurement in National 4-H Index Study will be aligned with the Beyond Ready Framework through 2030, which means data collected for your state during this time can inform the impact your Beyond Ready efforts are having on youth!

Measures in the study include:

- **Program Quality – how are your youth experiencing Sparks, Belonging, and Developmental relationships?**
- **Beyond Ready Outcomes – How are youth in your state becoming healthy, productive and engaged?**
- **4-H Program Outcomes – From career readiness to STEM, the National 4-H Index Study measures a variety of youth outcomes.**
- **4-H Influence – Questions ask youth directly about the level of influence that 4-H has had on their work and life skill development.**
- **Ready for Life- Measures of personal integrity, responsibility, purpose, caring and connection, goal setting, and growth mindset are all part of the National Index Study. Each year, two of these measures are included in the study, and the selected measures rotate annually.**

Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

The National 4-H Index Study provides an opportunity to measure, monitor, and share the impact of Beyond Ready across the country. Data are aggregated from participating LGUs results in a national-level report on the 4-H Beyond Ready initiative.

At the national level, results from the annual Index Study are used to monitor and assess baseline movement across Beyond Ready program outcomes. Gathering sufficient data also enables statistical modeling of the Beyond Ready framework and supports the development of evaluation instruments — available in the 4-H Common Measures library — for use in local program evaluations.

Detailed state-level reports that compare state results to national results are prepared for states that reach a pre-determined number of valid youth responses. The minimum number is based on the LGU's enrollment numbers and does not exceed 250 cases for states with the largest enrollments. State level data sets are available to LGUs for subsequent analysis if desired.

In addition, data collected through the National 4-H Index Study contributes to demonstrating the public value of the Beyond Ready Initiative. Through a series of listening sessions with 4-H State Program Leaders, 4-H Foundation Directors, and Beyond Ready Champions, four priority public value stories were identified.

- **Workforce Skill Development**
- **Community Sustainability**
- **Post-Secondary Readiness**
- **Health and Wellness**

The 2025 National 4-H Index Study data demonstrated 4-H's positive impact on these four areas. Ready-to-print public value stories based on the 2025 study are now available on the 4-H Common Measures website. See below for information on how to access these impactful stories for your use in sharing the impact of 4-H with others.

How to Use this Information

Participating in the national Index Study is an easy way to monitor the progress and impact of Beyond Ready at the LGU level. The 4-H Common Measures team is there to help facilitate and support your state's participation. Information on the annual Index Study is sent to state program leaders near the end of each year, and getting started is easy! Just reach out to the 4-H Common Measures team!

Learn More

Visit the Common Measures page on 4-H.org (access required) at:

4-h.org/resources/professionals/common-measures

Contact information for the 4-H Common Measures Team:

Jill Lingard (jlingard@unl.edu) **Makayla Burg (mburg2@unl.edu)**

4-H COMMON MEASURES

4-H Common Measures

What This Is

National 4-H Common Measures contains a library of evaluation instrument that were created to provide state 4-H programs with resources to support the planning of local, statewide, and regional evaluations. Included in the library are a common core of outcomes, indicators, and measures that can be used to create standardized survey tools for anyone delivering 4-H programming.

Development of the initial measures in the library was a collaboration of efforts including 4-H National Headquarters, National 4-H Council, and representatives from the land grant universities and the National 4-H Mission Mandate management teams. Measurement development continues in partnership with youth development and evaluation experts across the national Extension system.

In addition to the library of survey instruments, 4-H Common Measures also offers a suite of resources to support evaluation capacity building, with on-line learning courses, office hours and webinar-based trainings.

The 4-H Common Measures team also coordinates National Calls for Data and participation in the annual National 4-H Index Study.

Why It Is Important for Beyond Ready

The use of a common set of metrics allows consistent measurement and reporting of the Beyond Ready Initiative. The annual National 4-H Index Study was adapted to align with the Beyond Ready Initiative and includes measures in the following areas that contribute to telling a national Beyond Ready Story. The Beyond Ready measures are now available in the 4-H Common Measures library for use with local programs:

- **Healthy – Physical and Emotional Health**
- **Productive Time Management**
- **Engaged – Community Contributions**
- **Work Readiness Skills**

- College and Career Readiness
- Leadership
- Post-Secondary Pathways Support

How to Use this Information

Beyond Ready programming conducted at the local and state level have important impact on young people that is not captured by the National 4-H Index Study alone. Using standard evaluation instruments to measure elements of the Beyond Framework, including program quality, ready for work and life indicators, and the Beyond Ready outcomes of Healthy, Productive, and Engaged ensures that we are telling a consistent story about the impact of Beyond Ready across the country.

Evaluating local programs using the instruments in the 4-H Common Measures library can assist you in monitoring program quality and the impact of your Beyond Ready programs.

Learn More

Visit the Common Measures page on 4-H.org (access required) at:

4-h.org/resources/professionals/common-measures

Contact information for the 4-H Common Measures Team:

Jill Lingard (jlingard@unl.edu) **Makayla Burg (mburg2@unl.edu)**

4-H COMMON MEASURES

Beyond Ready | Program Checklist

DEVELOPING HEALTHY, PRODUCTIVE & ENGAGED YOUTH

4-H's approach to readiness begins with participation in high-quality youth development programs. 4-H has historically helped young people prepare for work and life through the development of competencies, skills and tangible assets resulting in youth who are healthy, productive and engaged. The complex landscape youth face today calls us to go a step further in preparing them to navigate their readiness pathway during and after their 4-H experience. ***Are your programs intentionally preparing youth to be Beyond Ready for the changing world?***

Beyond Ready Program Checklist

This checklist outlines the necessary elements of **Beyond Ready programming** outlined on the Beyond Ready Framework. Designed to aid the planning and preparation of Beyond Ready programming, the checklist can be applied to a single program or used to review collective program offerings. The questions are a guide to help you assess what you're doing well and where there is opportunity for growth.

Beyond Ready programming is defined by **a high-quality youth development setting**, a non-negotiable foundation, combined with intentional program experiences that focus on: **readiness for work**; **readiness for life**; and **individualized support for post-secondary pathways**.

☐ Are you delivering high-quality Youth Development experiences?

Do the program design and practices intentionally include the elements of a high-quality developmental context?

- ☐ Fostering Sparks *(a passion for developing an interest or skill that inspires a sense of direction)*
- ☐ Promoting Belonging *(a sense of security, connection and feeling valued)*
- ☐ Supporting Developmental Relationships *(a trusted relationship with a caring adult that fosters youth development)*
- ☐ Encouraging Engagement *(active pursuit of individual learning and development)*

Non-Negotiable: *All elements are necessary for 4-H Beyond Ready programming.*

Notes:

☐ Are you creating opportunities for youth to be Ready for Work?

Does the program have the opportunity for youth to develop knowledge, skills and assets to be ready for work?

- ☐ Teaching 4-H Project Content *(STEM, agriculture, health, other)*
- ☐ Building Work Readiness Skills *(professionalism, work ethic, organizational skills)*
- ☐ Supporting College and Career Readiness *(academics, college exploration and career exploration)*
- ☐ Fostering Leadership Development *(navigating differences, leading others, decision making, communication, collaboration)*
- ☐ Offering Real Life Experiences *(internships, apprenticeships, summer employment)*

Customizable: *Intentionally target development in one or more area.*

Notes:

Revised October 2025

☐ **Are you providing opportunities for youth to be Ready for Life?**

Does the program target the development of personal attributes to be ready for life?

- ☐ Promoting Personal Integrity *(ethical decision making, honesty, reliability)*
- ☐ Supporting Responsibility *(self-discipline, personal accountability, perseverance)*
- ☐ Fostering Purpose *(direction, motivation, sense of meaning)*
- ☐ Promoting Caring & Connection *(concern, compassion, generosity, consideration)*
- ☐ Promoting Goal Setting & Management *(persistence, critical thinking, problem-solving)*
- ☐ Encouraging a Growth Mindset *(originality, creativity, curiosity)*

Customizable: *Intentionally target development of one or more personal attributes.*

Notes:

☐ **Are learning experiences assisting youth in their development of Individualized Post-Secondary Pathways?**

Does the program employ intentional program content or strategies focused on preparing youth for future pathways?

- ☐ Mentoring Relationships *(established developmental relationships that will provide youth with the guidance and support needed to navigate their pathways)*
- ☐ Inspiring Future Pathways *(challenging young people in their growth and expanding the possibilities to achieve their desired purpose)*
- ☐ Creating Pathway Plans *(establishing goals and encouraging meaningful progress toward their intended purpose)*
- ☐ Preparing for Pathway Navigation *(developing the skills and resources needed to adapt, address challenges and maximize opportunity)*

Customizable: *Intentionally employ one or more strategies that support young people in their post-secondary pathway.*

Notes:

☐ **Does the program focus on a young person's whole being and prepare them to make positive decisions relative to Health, Productivity and Engagement?**

Do the program outcomes align with developing youth who are healthy, productive and ready to engage in their future pathways?

- ☐ Developing Healthy Habits *(habits that lead to wellness in body, mind and being)*
- ☐ Fostering Productivity *(meaningful ways to spend their time and energy)*
- ☐ Growing Engagement *(participation in meaningful experiences that contribute to success for self and others)*

Customizable: *Intentionally target long-term readiness in one or more area.*

Notes:

Beyond Ready Initiative Framework

4-H Programming

High-quality youth development programs that promote:

- **Sparks**
- **Belonging**
- **Relationships**
- **Engagement**

4-H prepares youth for Work & Life by:

READY FOR WORK

Teaching 4-H Project Content
(STEM, AGRICULTURE, HEALTH)

Building Work Readiness Skills
(PROFESSIONALISM, WORK ETHIC, ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS)

Supporting College & Career Readiness
(ACADEMICS, COLLEGE EXPLORATION, CAREER EXPLORATION)

Fostering Leadership Development
(NAVIGATING NETWORKS, LEADING OTHERS, DECISION MAKING, COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION)

Offering Real-Life Experiences
(INTERNSHIPS, APPRENTICESHIPS, SUMMER EMPLOYMENT)

Providing Post-Secondary Pathway Development Support**
(MENTORING, PATHWAY PLANNING, CREATING & NAVIGATING)

READY FOR LIFE

Promoting Personal Integrity
(ETHICAL DECISION MAKING, HONESTY, RELIABILITY)

Supporting Responsibility
(SELF-DISCIPLINE, PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY, PERSEVERANCE)

Fostering Purpose
(DIRECTION, MOTIVATION, SENSE OF MEANING)

Promoting Caring & Connection
(CONCERN, COMPASSION, GENEROSITY, CONSIDERATION)

Promoting Goal Setting & Management
(PERSISTENCE, CRITICAL THINKING, PROBLEM-SOLVING)

Encouraging a Growth Mindset
(ORIGINALITY, CREATIVITY, CURIOSITY)

4-H Program Outcomes

Ready for Work and Life

- Content Knowledge & Skills
- Post-Secondary Planning
- Leadership Skills
- Critical Thinking Skills
- Problem-Solving Skills
- Technological Skills
- Social Intelligence
- Persistence
- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Creativity

**Supporting youth in developing post-secondary (life after high school) pathways is critical and should be a priority in Beyond Ready.

Beyond Ready Goal

10 million youth who are:

- **Healthy**
- **Productive**
- **Engaged**

Revised November 2025

Notes:

Beyond Ready

NATIONAL 4-H COUNCIL

Oregon State University

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