

# THE VALUE OF 4-H COMPETITIVE ACTIVITIES AS PERCEIVED BY THE PARENTS OF 4-H MEMBERS

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## Abstract

*The major-purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of 4-H parents in Districts II and IV in the Texas 4-H program relative to the educational value of competition in the 4-H program. Two-hundred-fifty parents whose children were currently or formerly enrolled in the 4-H program were sampled from the population.*

*The parents in the study had a very positive attitude toward competition in 4-H, regardless of demographic background. The major reasons the parents had their children participate in 4-H competitive events were because they perceived it enhanced their child's personal skill development and self esteem. The major concerns the parents had about 4-H competitive activities centered on excessive parental involvement and unethical practices.*

*4-H parents in the districts varied in their attitude toward competition, primarily because of three factors: (1) senior volunteer leaders tended to be more positive toward competition than junior leaders, (2) individuals who participated in 4-H camp tended to be more positive toward competition, and (3) those former 4-H members who enrolled in 4-H at a later age tended to be more positive toward competition.*

## INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The 4-H organization is one of the oldest and largest experiential education programs for youth in the United States of America (Ladewig & Thomas, 1987). While the basic purpose of the 4-H program was originally the development of boys and girls for farm life, today's 4-H program is designed to enhance the development of responsible and capable citizens, regardless of home life or family background (Kelsey & Heame, 1963). Essentially, the purpose of the program is to create a supportive environment in which youth can reach their fullest potential (National FFA Organization, 1996).

From its beginning, the 4-H program has used a system of clubs and competitive activities to promote learning and the development of the

specific skills of 4-H members (Ladewig & Thomas, 1987). The value of club participation and competitive activities can be traced back to the agricultural clubs and contests created around the turn of the century (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). Weber and McCullers (1986) stated that "young men and women who traditionally attain the highest levels of achievement in the 4-H program are typically very successful 'in other aspects of life as well'" (p. 20). Researchers have indicated that some of the most important goals of 4-H have been to provide educational opportunities for youth through competitive activities. They discern that competition stimulates creativity and motivates members to set goals, complete tasks, and strive for excellence (4-H Leader, 1986).

Although American society is based on competition (Rich & DeVitis, 1992; Weber & McCullers, 1986), many believe that pressing

questions should be raised about the benefits of competition (Moe, 1961; Weber & McCullers, 1986; Hale, 1993), and Kieth (1997) reported that many of the concerns about competition in the 4-H program can be traced back to excessive parental involvement in competition designed for youth participation. Even though the backbone of the 4-H program is volunteer and parental involvement, the effects of adult and parent involvement in youth competitive activities have been an issue in the 4-H program for many years (Ames & Ames, 1978; Goodwin, 1994). It is this concern about the value of competitive events and parental involvement in the 4-H program that has led to the study.

### **PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The major purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of 4-H parents in two extension districts in Texas relative to the educational value of competition in the 4-H program. An additional purpose was to determine if there was a relationship between selected demographic variables and perceptions of parents. Specific questions of the research were:

1. What are the demographic variables and levels of 4-H participation of 4-H parents in Extension Districts II and IV in Texas?
2. What are these parents' attitudes toward competitive activities in 4-H?
3. Is there a statistically significant relationship between selected 4-H parent demographic characteristics and attitude toward 4-H competitive activities?
4. Do perceptions of competition differ for 4-H parents who participated in 4-H competitive activities and those 4-H parents who did not participate in 4-H competitive activities?
5. What are the major benefits and problems

of 4-H competition as perceived by 4-H parents?

### **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

A descriptive survey design was used to gather information to describe the current situation and to determine relationships that might fulfill the research questions.

The target population of this study was 4-H parents whose children were currently or formerly enrolled in the 4-H program in Districts II and District IV of the Texas 4-H Program. The districts were chosen which best represented important characteristics such as geographic location, urban versus rural, and variety of 4-H competitive activities offered. The list of subjects in the target population was taken from the Texas 4-H District II and IV mailing lists. Dr. Bob Robinson, extension director for District II, Mr. Randy Upshaw, extension director for District IV, and Angela Burkham, Extension Program Specialist – 4-H, provided assistance in verifying the list. Two hundred and fifty parents were selected using sampling techniques as described by Borg and Gall (1994). The sample was a proportionally random sample stratified by 4-H districts.

The instrument for the study was a two-part, mailed questionnaire. It was researcher-designed and was composed in a booklet format according to the Total Design Method (TDM) developed by Dillman (1978). Part One was used to gather demographic information from the subjects. Part Two consisted of a five-point Likert-Scale using questions about competition. The questions in Part Two were modified from surveys published by Hale (1993), Ladewig and Thomas (1987), and Treat (1975). Each of the surveys dealt with the issue of 4-H competition. The Hale (1993) study dealt with the attitudes of several individuals associated with the 4-H program, including volunteer leaders and 4-H parents. Questions from Hale's survey, a attitudinal Likert-scale on 4-

H competition, was adapted for use in conjunction with questions from Treat's (1975). The instrument from Ladewig and Thomas' (1987) study titled "Assessing the Impact of 4-H on Former Members" was used for the development of the demographic information used in the current instrument. Treat's (1975) study, "Attitudes toward Incentives and Competition," proved to be the most useful in the development of the Likert-scale portion of the current instrument. Section IV of Treat's (1975) survey dealing with competition was used because it offered a number of positive and negative statements about the issue of competition. Ten positive and ten negative statements were chosen for the purpose of developing a Competition Attitude Index (CAI) score for the participants of the study. Each of the responses to the questions carried a numerical value score with 5 having the most positive attitude toward competition, and 1 indicating the least positive attitude toward competition. By placing a value on each response, a CAI score could be determined for each participant of the study.

Another section in Part Two required the parents to respond to open ended questions. This allowed respondents the opportunity to express further options about the benefits and/or problems with 4-H competitive events and activities.

Early forms of the instrument were reviewed by faculty and staff in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communications at Texas Tech University, and associates of the Agricultural Extension Service. Their suggestions and comments were used to refine the questionnaire which was later given to a panel of agricultural educators at Texas Tech University for review (see Appendix A for a list of the panel members). Professors, graduate students, county extension agents, and 4-H adult leaders comprised the panel. All but two of the panel members either had a graduate degree in agricultural education or were currently enrolled in a graduate program in the field at the time they reviewed the instrument.

Seventy percent of the panel members had been a member of the Texas 4-H program, and twenty percent had children currently enrolled in the Texas 4-H program. The review was used to verify the content validity of the instrument and to make changes and clarifications prior to mailing the survey. Major changes that were made at the suggestion of the panel were the addition of instructions and the addition of categories to some of the questions which asked demographic information.

A formative review of the instrument was conducted on May 1, 1997, at a District II 4-H Adult Leaders Meeting, using a group of twenty 4-H parents whose children were currently involved in the Texas 4-H program. Suggestions were solicited from the group for any problems or difficulties that were noticed while completing the instrument. Only minor modifications were made to the questionnaire, including correction of a grammatical error and the addition of open-ended questions.

Upon reaching the pre-determined acceptable response level (70%), statistical analysis of the data files was completed using SPSS for the Macintosh. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data pertaining to: (a) the demographic and 4-H background of the parents, (b) parents' responses concerning educational value of 4-H competitive activities, and (c) the greatest benefits and greatest problems with 4-H competitive activities. In order to determine if there was a difference in parents' responses according to demographics and 4-H background, a **stepwise** multiple regression was performed at the .05 level of significance.

## FINDINGS

### Demographic Variables

The majority of respondents and their spouses were Caucasian/ American parents who had been reared on a farm or ranch. Over 60% of them had

been 4-H members as a youth. The most common age at which they joined 4-H was nine. They typically had been members of 4-H for more than nine years. The most common activities in which parents participated as former 4-H members were competitive events, community club, and project club. Over 80% of them had served as a 4-H volunteer leader. Although the range of service was from one to 32 years, the average parent had been a leader from six to eight years. Nearly 90% of the parents had a child that had placed in the top three in a 4-H competitive event.

Attitude toward Competition

As a group, the parents tended to agree with statements that were positive toward competition and disagreed with statements that were negative toward competition. The statements (Table 1) with which they agreed most were “Competition teaches 4-Hers to work for what they get,” “Competition has helped my child learn,” and “Competition is beneficial to youth development.” The statements (Table 2) with which the parents disagreed the most were “Competition is not good

Table 1 Mean Scores for Comments Indicating Positive Attitudes Toward Competition

Comment	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Competition teaches 4-Hers to work for what they get	4.2	0.8
Competition has helped my child learn.	4.2	0.9
Children like to compete	4.0	0.7
Competition prepares youth for a competitive world	4.0	0.8
Competition is beneficial to youth development	4.0	0.8
Competitive events help 4-Hers fund college education	3.5	1.1
Activities based on competition are better learning experiences than non-competitive activities	3.4	1.1
Competition is an incentive for youth to join 4-H	2.9	1.1
Winners are more successful in life than losers	2.9	1.2

Note. Rating Scale 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Uncertain, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree

Table 2 Mean Scores for Comments Indicating Negative Attitudes Toward Competition

Comment	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Competition is not good for young people	1.8	0.8
Children are considered losers if they don't win a prize such as a ribbon, plaque or cash award	1.9	1.1
Competition destroys teamwork	2.1	1.0
Activities which are competitive decrease a child's motivation to do well	2.3	1.1
Youth who don't win drop out of 4-H"	2.4	1.0
There is too much emphasis on competition in the 4-H program	2.5	1.1
Competition encourages cheating	2.5	1.2
Competition promotes aggressive behavior	2.6	1.1
There are better ways to educate youth than through the use of competition	2.9	1.0
Unethical practices often result from competition	3.1	1.3

Note. Rating Scale 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Uncertain, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree

for young people," Children are considered losers if they don't win a prize such as a ribbon, plaque or cash award," and "Competition destroys teamwork."

Perceived Benefits and Problems of 4-H Competition

The most common benefit of 4-H competition

perceived by the parents was personal skill development (Table 3). This was followed by enhancement of self esteem, motivation of youth to succeed, setting and attaining goals, and family social relationships.

The most common problem with 4-H competitive events perceived by the parents was excessive parental involvement, followed closely

by unethical practices (Table 4). Other problems identified in order of importance were development of bad characteristics, improper parental attitudes toward competition, too much money spent on show animals, unequal opportunities, lack of agent help, and competition starting with children that are too young.

Relationship between Demographic and 4-H Participation Variables and Parent's Perceptions of Competitive Activities

None of the demographic variables in the study were found to be related to a parent's attitude toward competitive events in 4-H. 4-H participation variables which were found to be significantly related to a positive attitude toward 4-H competitive events were years served as a 4-H volunteer leader ( $r = .42$ ), years spouse served as a 4-H volunteer leader ( $r = .41$ ), years spouse participated in 4-H ( $r = .28$ ), spouse's participation

in 4-H camp ( $r = .27$ ), spouse's participation in individual study using 4-H manuals ( $r = .21$ ), participation in 4-H camp ( $r = .21$ ), and age when first participated in 4-H ( $r = .19$ ).

Importance of Variables in Explaining Variance in Attitude toward 4-H Competitive Events

When entered into a multiple regression equation it was found that three of the 4-H participation variables of the parents explained 22.4% of the total variance in their attitude toward 4-H competitive events (Table 5). The most important variable in explaining the variance was years served as a 4-H volunteer. The second most important was spouse participation in 4-H camp, and the third was age at which enrolled in 4-H. All the relationships were positive which meant that as the value of the 4-H participation variable increased, so did positive attitude toward 4-H competitive events.

Table 3 Response to question "What is the greatest benefit (or benefits) you see of 4-H competitive events?"

Benefit	f
Personal skill development (responsibility, work ethic, dependability, cooperation, sportsmanship, etc.)	67
Enhancement of self esteem	26
Motivation of youth to succeed	16
Setting and achieving goals	14
Family social relationships	9
Various benefits	
Financial & scholarship benefits	3

Table 4 Response to question “What is the greatest problem (or Problems) you see with 4-H competitive events?”

Problem	f
Excessive parental involvement	31
Unethical practices	27
Development of bad characteristics (poor sportsmanship, too much emphasis on winning, etc.)	16
Improper parental attitudes toward competition	12
Too much money spent on show animals	10
Unequal opportunities	4
Lack of agent help	3
Competition starting with children that are too young	2
Other	4

Table 5 Stepwise multiple regression of selected variables on Competition Attitude Index (CAI)

Variable	$\beta$	t	p
Years served as a volunteer leader	.366	5.150	.000*
Spouse’s participation in 4-H Camp	.249	3.525	.001*
Age when entered 4-H	.194	2.727	.007**

Note.  $F(3, 157) = 15.075$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $R^2 = .224$  \* $p < .05$

### Conclusions/ Recommendations

The following conclusions are based on interpretations of data presented in the study and are restricted to the populations surveyed. The conclusions are as follows:

1. The Texas 4-H Districts II and IV are not serving a very diverse population, Very few 4-H parents in Texas 4-H Districts II and IV are from minority families. Over 95% of the respondents in the study indicated they were Caucasian/American.

Most of the 4-H parents in these districts have a rural background. Nearly 50% of them were raised on a farm or ranch. Less than one-fifth of the parents were reared in

an urban setting. There is a low rate of single parent status among the 4-H parents in these districts. Nearly 90% of the individuals in the study reported that they were currently married. This contrasts with a national average of 75.8% for Caucasian/American families (U. S. Census Bureau, 1995). There is a tendency for youth in these districts to join 4-H if their parents were former members. Over 60% of the 4-H parents indicated they had been former members of 4-H.

2. Parents in the district who were former 4-H members tended to join 4-H at the earliest opportunity. A large number who joined tended to stay in the organization the maximum length of time they were

eligible. Over 70% joined between the age of eight and ten, and the most common years of membership were nine and ten.

3. Parents in the district who were former 4-H members tended to join 4-H in order to participate in competitive activities.
4. Most 4-H parents in the district were willing to serve as 4-H volunteer leaders. Over 80% indicated they had or were serving as a leader; some had served as long as 32 years.
5. A vast majority of the 4-H parents had children who excelled in 4-H competition. Over 87% reported they had a child who placed in the top three at a competitive 4-H event.
6. 4-H parents in the districts have a very positive attitude toward competition in 4-H. This was clearly evidenced by their levels of agreement with statements that were positive toward competition and disagreement with statements that were negative toward competition.
7. The major reasons parents in the districts have their children participate in 4-H competitive events is because the parents feel it enhances their child's personal skill development, enhances self esteem, motivates children to success, and helps youth to set goals. They also enjoy the family social relationships that are created by competitive events.
8. The major concerns parents in the districts have about 4-H competitive activities center on excessive parental involvement and unethical practices. They view excessive money spent on show animals as a problem and are concerned about the development of bad characteristics through competition such as poor sportsmanship

and placing too much emphasis on winning.

9. 4-H parents in the districts have the same positive attitudes toward competition regardless of demographic background. None of the demographic variables in the study were found to be significantly related to an individual's attitude toward competition.
10. 4-H parents in the districts vary in their attitude toward competition, primarily because of three factors. Senior volunteer leaders tend to be more positive toward competition than junior leaders, individuals who participated in 4-H camp tend to be more positive toward competition, and those former 4-H members who enrolled in 4-H at a later age tend to be more positive toward competition.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made by the investigators as a result of having made this study:

1. Four-H should continue to offer competitive activities as part of its educational program. A vast majority of the parents who have children that are currently enrolled in 4-H see many benefits of participation in these activities and have very positive attitudes toward competition. This positive perception occurs regardless of demographic characteristics. It is important to note that a large majority of the parents who serve as volunteer leaders have positive attitudes toward competitive events. Perhaps even more importantly, those who are the strongest supporters-as evidenced by their long years of service as a leader-have the most positive attitudes toward competitive events.

2. It is recommended that the benefits of 4-H competition identified in this study be publicized to extension personnel in order that they might use this information as a recruitment tool. It should be noted that most of the benefits center on self improvement of young people and development of strong family relations.
3. In seeking ways to improve competitive programs in 4-H, extension personnel should concentrate on four major issues, all of which involve parents: (1) excessive parental involvement (2) unethical practices, (3) excessive money spent on show animals, and (4) too much emphasis being placed on winning. Conversely, it is also recommended that a high level of parental involvement continue in 4-H. Parents, particularly those who have a positive attitude toward competition in 4-H, have a tremendous influence on whether their children join the organization and participate in similar activities. One of the identified benefits of 4-H competition is parental involvement and family social relations. Obviously, there is a challenge in getting parents to assist with competitive activities while maintaining the designed educational value of the activity.
4. It is recommended that extension personnel analyze activities of State 4-H Camp to determine what it is that generates a high level of positive enthusiasm for competitive 4-H events. It may be possible that extension of these activities to other 4-H programs will produce similar positive reactions. District and local 4-H camps should also be examined for the same purpose.
5. The Texas 4-H program should continue to offer, and perhaps even increase, competitive activities for senior 4-H members. Parents in this study who missed out on 4-H in their youth and joined 4-H at a later age, have a more positive attitude toward competition than those who joined at an early age. This would suggest that one of the reasons they joined 4-H was to participate in competitive activities. Since one of the problems facing Texas 4-H is retaining or attracting older youth of 4-H age, one potential solution to the problem might be offering more competitive activities for older youth.
6. If one of the goals of the Texas 4-H program is to expand the clientele it currently serves, it is recommended that expansion be concentrated in three areas: (1) among the minority population, (2) within the population who have an urban background, and (3) among single parent families. It is likely that a number of reasons may exist which prevent high levels of participation in 4-H by these three groups. Therefore, it is recommended that research efforts be directed at determining why each of these groups do not participate.
7. This study should be replicated in other districts within the state and across the nation to see if similar findings occur. It is highly recommended that the study be replicated in districts within the state that have high levels of minority population.

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