Targeting Life Skills Gets to the Heart of 4-H

The Situation
Since its inception, 4-H has been about youth development. 4-H offers programs designed to teach youth subject matter content and skills using a learn-by-doing methodology. Whether it be an animal project, a cooking project, or a leadership project, 4-H seeks to provide learning experiences that foster life skills development.

However, far too often the focus swings toward the competitions, the products that result from a project, and the activities of the project. The life skills development becomes secondary to the event or the competition. The emphasis too often is on the winning exhibit rather than on the development of the life skills. There is a need to re-focus the program on the development of the life skills rather than on the exhibit for the fair.

Our Response
In 1995, Pat Hendricks from Iowa State University developed the Targeting Life Skills Model (TLS). The purpose of the model was to simplify the coordination of life skills development with ages and stages tasks so that the 4-H program will be developmentally appropriate and more effective in reaching the desired outcomes. The TLS model provides a visual guide and research based information to help 4-H professionals and volunteers build on the life skills that are at the foundation of the 4-H’s—head, heart, hands and health.

Training done in each District, many counties and at the State Leader’s Forum served to introduce the Targeting Life Skills Model to 4-H members, leaders and Extension educators. Experiential training, educational resources, roundtable discussions and mentoring relationships emphasizing life skills development have become key components of the Idaho State 4-H program in the past two years.

Achievements
As a result of extensive training on the TLS model, there has been an increased awareness on the importance of a life skills focus in local 4-H programs. There has been a significant increase in knowledge in the following areas:
1. designing activities to target life skills development
2. developing age appropriate educational activities
3. applying the experiential model to process educational activities

Training Extension Educators and volunteers in the TLS model has provided the impetus to plan and implement programs with a life skills youth development emphasis. The heart of the program is on the youth rather than on the project. Adopting and promoting a life skills approach supports the mission of 4-H—to help youth acquire knowledge, life skills and attitudes that enhance their lives.
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Positive Youth Development Processes:
A Life Skills Focus

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