



## Creating positive parental influence in 4-H competitions: A guide for 4-H Volunteers<sup>1</sup>

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Competition in 4-H is an important part of the learning process. It provides an opportunity for youth to show what they've learned through the project experience and helps them gain valuable life skills.

Studies have shown that youth with positive parental involvement in their informal educational experiences are more successful than youth without these experiences (Lerner et al., 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Conversely, parents who are "parent-focused" and not "child-focused" actually inhibit the success of the child in competitive programs like 4-H (Torretta & Bovitz, 2005).

Self-focused parents who negatively impact their child's learning experiences can be difficult to deal with. Their behavior can have a tremendous impact on the 4-H member, and even the overall County program. Extension professionals and 4-H Volunteers continuously struggle to understand how to redirect and properly engage an overly involved parent.

Youth Extension educators, Alayne Torretta and Laura Bovitz (2005), came up with the 4-As of motivation to use

in dealing with problematic youth and parent behaviors. The 4-As are a useful tool for youth Extension educators to assess the motivational needs of youth and adults. Once needs are understood, undesirable behaviors can be replaced with suggested acceptable ways to meet their motivational needs. The 4-As motivating behavior are: Affiliation; Achievement; Altruism; and Aggression. The following are examples of parents motivated by each of the 4-As, common to 4-H Youth Development programs and other competitive youth programs across the nation.

### *The Affiliation Parent*

This parent group is reliving childhood through their own children. An affiliation parent is looking for a connection to the program through the child. Such parents may be trying to accomplish things they never accomplished themselves and thus experience success vicariously.

The affiliation parent is often very engaged in 4-H and is usually quite knowledgeable about the projects. This parent, when properly engaged, can be a valuable resource. To redirect this

1. This document is 4H 8.5 one of a series of the 4-H Youth Development Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published December 2008. Please visit the 4-H website at <http://florida4h.org/>.

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parent, try involving him or her with a group of youth in a project experience. This may allow such parents the opportunity to share their knowledge and take their focus away from just their own children.

### ***The Achievement-Focused Parent***

This parent is likely to be a bully. The achievement-focused parent is overly aggressive towards his or her child, walking a fine line towards an abusive relationship. They may speak negatively to or about the child in front of others (for example, through put-downs). They believe such behavior best motivates achievement in the child, and perhaps they were also treated that way growing up. To properly engage such parent and best serve the child, give them roles separate from working with their child. This will give these parents an opportunity to observe their child from a distance and appreciate positive comments from other adults about their child. Achievement-focused parents may also learn new ways to motivate youth by working with other parents on different projects.

### ***The Altruistic or Distracted Parent***

This parent group is overextended and has a difficult time juggling their children's activities and their own. They are trying to do it all. These parents are very hard workers, but have little time for involvement in 4-H.

Youth professionals may best work with altruistic or distracted parents by providing short-term projects to provide positive interaction with their child. For example, this may involve helping at a fundraiser, assigning a project at one

meeting, or driving youth on a field trip. However, make sure experiences are planned well in advance to be considerate of altruistic/distracted parent's schedule.

### ***The Aggressive-Competitive Parent***

The aggressive-competitive parent group is all about winning. They believe 4-H is all about competition. They gauge their child's success by whether or not he or she wins. You are likely to see these parents standing outside the show ring at the end of a show. Their feedback to their child, and to other adults involved in the competition, will pertain mainly to the color of the ribbon.

This parent, with redirection and mentoring, can contribute a tremendous amount to the 4-H experience. Provide opportunities for this parent away from the competitive event; for example, a cooperative learning event, and/or a celebration of group success. These parents usually have a great deal of project area experience and knowledge. Teaching in educational activities outside competitive events can direct their skills in an area where they can see life skill development happen away from the show ring. This will help aggressive-competitive parents to learn more about monitoring the progress of the youth they work with by the goals they set for themselves (i.e., "youth progress in self-set goals" as a form of 4-H recognition) rather than comparing their child to others in terms of performance (learning to compare youth to their own performance instead of that of others).

### ***Research on Effects of Competition on Children***

A survey of over 750 4-H youth in the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grades found that some felt their parents' support was dependent on their winning or doing well in 4-H activities and school (Fetsch & Yang, 2002). Fortunately, overall, the 4-H'ers surveyed felt a high level of unconditional support from their parents and enjoyed benefits from cooperative learning activities. In summary, the researchers suggested providing more cooperative than competitive individualistic learning activities in youth programs such as 4-H because cooperation feeds a youth's sense of competency (Fetsch & Yang, 2002).

### ***Parent Engagement begins Now***

The best approach to improving parental involvement in 4-H is continuous education. Here are some suggestions for the club experience based on the 4-As motivating parents and/or youth:

- ✓ Involve parents and youth members in goal setting. Make sure life skill development goals are identified. This will help:
  - *affiliation* parents appreciate their child's own goals and interests apart from their own;
  - *achievement-focused* parents to understand better ways to motivate youth progress through goal-setting;
  - *altruistic-distracted* parents to see the bigger picture of their child's progress and focus; and
  - *aggressive-competitive* parents to focus more on the process of youth learning than the end product of "winning."
- ✓ Have a clear list of activities and roles for parents to engage in their clubs. This is especially helpful for

*altruistic-distracted* parents who have hectic schedules but need to be fit into the program. Also, redefining leader and club roles for *affiliation*, *achievement-focused*, and *aggressive-competitive* parents can help take their focus off their child's performance or accomplishments and onto project activities.

- ✓ Take time to get to know your parents, their motivational tendencies based on the 4-As and learn what talents and skills they bring to the club as you help define their roles.
- ✓ When preparing for a competitive event, discuss what the learning goals and achievements are for the youth and offer measures of success beyond ribbon color (for example, life skill development and personal improvement with *achievement-focused* and *aggressive-competitive* parents).
- ✓ Encourage parents (especially *affiliation*, *achievement-focused*, and *aggressive-competitive* parents) to continue supporting their children unconditionally (regardless of which project they select and how their projects place), while providing constructive suggestions aimed at improvement, not perfection (Fetsch & Yang, 2002).
- ✓ Provide and model your own positive feedback and reinforcement opportunities for club members and leaders. Club leaders (especially *achievement-focused* ones) have a unique opportunity to learn how to provide similar positive feedback to youth.
- ✓ Create a system in your 4-H program that rewards cooperation in addition to competition at county, district, and state events (Fetsch & Yang, 2002).

Overall, 4-H faculty and staff can encourage parent participation and motivation at a cooperative rather than competitive level and to understand the true meaning of 4-H to promote youth development in partnership with adults and their communities.

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