

# Strategies to Engage 4-H Parents<sup>1</sup>

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## Importance of Engagement

Parent engagement makes a significant impact on a club's success in fostering the development of targeted life skills in youth participants. The primary source parents turn to for 4-H information is volunteer club leaders (club leaders). If the club leader doesn't inform parents about a 4-H activity, event, or policy, they may never learn of it on their own. Because of this, it is vitally important that 4-H club leaders engage parents in their child's club experience as well as the overall 4-H program.

4-H agents from the top eight programs in Kansas rated these as four of the top competencies club leaders need:

- Keeping parents involved
- Facilitating the active involvement of parents and other adult members of the 4-H programs
- Providing information and training to parents
- Facilitating the active involvement of parents and other adult members of the 4-H programs (Barker & O'Brien, 2001)

4-H agents should recognize that club leaders have the largest impact on parent 4-H experiences. Some counties have more than 200 families registered, making it impossible for an agent to personally know every family. On the other hand, club leaders see these families regularly. Not only are the club leaders helping youth develop life skills, but they are also the face of 4-H for most families. For this reason,

it is so important that agents share effective strategies for engaging the parents of youth in 4-H clubs.

## Strategies for Engagement

Because a club leader's primary focus is on helping youth develop targeted life skills, it can be challenging to develop ways to engage parents. It is important to note that parental support of the club leader's efforts make the 4-Hers' experience more satisfying and the club leader's job easier. When implementing any of these strategies, club leaders should take individual differences into account and be aware that not every strategy will work on every parent.

1. Create a welcoming and engaging environment to make the club meeting less overwhelming.
  - Strategy: Along with knowing club members' names, the club leader needs to learn the parents' names. Using nametags at the beginning of the year to learn youth names, the club leader can also give them to parents so that not only does the club leader learn their name, but they get to know each other as well.
2. Involve 4-Hers and their parents in setting goals and planning club programs.
  - Strategy: When club leaders are asking questions about time schedules, they need to include parents in those discussions. This is the one instance when the club leader can make parents the focus of the discussion, because they are normally the 4-Hers' transportation to and from the meetings. Be sure that program decisions are still

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- made through the youth-adult partnership between the club leader and 4-H'ers.
3. Become familiar with the interests and talents of 4-H'ers' parents.
    - Strategy: Survey the parents on their interests, skills, and availability to find out how they would like to contribute and discover what they aren't willing to do.
  4. When parents volunteer to help, make sure they are involved in something worthwhile. Keep in mind, no job is too small if they are properly acknowledged for it.
    - Strategy: The club leader should thank parents regularly for smaller tasks. Some large-scale tasks could include joining a committee, coordinating field trips, creating a club "newsletter" for other parents, orienting new parents, and connecting the club to potential community partners (resources).
  5. Involve parents in sharing leadership when appropriate.
    - Strategy: Ask parents to be assistant leaders or to lead an activity or a committee supporting the club such as fundraising.
  6. Keep parents informed and help them understand program objectives.
    - Strategy: Regular communication is key; however, don't pack their inbox. Send relevant communications that either provide information on club activities or ask for a response. Phone and texts are also effective ways to contact families that aren't responding to emails. There are several free group-text apps that have proven effective.
  7. Invite parents to meetings.
    - Strategy: Hold a special meeting for parents where youth present the program. Keep in mind that the meetings are always youth-focused, so if parents are involved, the youth should be leading the activities.
  8. Let parents know what is expected from their child and the club leader's interest in their child.
    - Strategy: At a family orientation at the beginning of the year, the club leader can explain their expectations of the 4-H'er and their parents. Having the parents sign a "contract" acknowledging their agreement to support the club is one way to confirm their understanding of responsibilities.
  9. Recognize both 4-H'ers and their parents.
    - Strategy: Always keep youth the focus, but also take time to recognize the contributions and effort parents put forth. At the end of the year, when the club leader gives out awards for the 4-H'ers, a little time can be devoted to giving out acknowledgments (certificates, etc.) to parents for their contributions to the club.
  10. Maintain parent interest and arrange a special social event with parents.
    - Strategy: Have the 4-H'ers "serve" the parents and lead the activities at a dinner in their honor.
  11. Solicit parents' involvement in club and county events.
    - Strategy: When there are upcoming county events, the club leader could ask the agent what they need help with. Then, the club leader can tell the families about the specific volunteer requests and ask parents to sign up. This will also encourage 4-H'ers to participate in county events and activities.
  12. Give detailed instructions to parents on home activities they can assist their child with.
    - Strategy: Specific instructions on exactly what the parent can do to assist with a record book is one way to help the parent know what their child is up to and contribute to their child's club experience.
  13. Retention of new members might be improved simply by paying more attention to them.
    - Strategy: Setting up a buddy system is one idea, matching a new 4-H'er's family with a longer-term member and family who can give information and support.
- (New Jersey Leader Training Series, 2001; Baker, Kelley, Skiba, & Wise, 2016; Bunijevac & Durisic, 2017; Bovitz & Toretta, 2005; Hamilton, Neff, & Northern, 2014)

## Challenges with Communicating with Parents

Some parents are especially difficult to engage. Club leaders who take the time to get to know their 4-H'ers' parents may recognize characteristics that could impede parents from being positively engaged in their child's experience. The following are some personalities leaders may come across when relating to club parents. When a leader recognizes these characteristics in a parent, they can also identify how to effectively engage the parents in the 4-H experience.

**Vicarious Parent.** This parent meets his or her emotional needs by reliving childhood through his or her own child. Generally, this parent is seeking affiliation. The club leader can involve this type of parent by engaging them to work with other children, which will take the focus away from just their own child.

**Authoritarian Parent.** The authoritarian parent is not one that needs to be reported to authorities, because they normally engage in negative verbal and emotional behaviors, as opposed to physically abusive or neglectful actions. In general, these parents seek achievement, the need to succeed—sometimes bullying their child to make it happen. These parents are best engaged behind the scenes, such as in food booths or barn management where they can hear others compliment their child. This can provide them with evidence that their child is successful.

**Overcommitted Parent.** “Overextended with little time to spare for their own children” describes these parents. They are often coming from or going to one activity after the next. Tasks for this type of parent should be short-term and with limited commitment, such as working a short shift at an event—as long as the parent gets lots of advance notice.

**Competitive Parent.** For this parent, it is all about winning. Because they are eager for the competition, they are looking for achievement, and they have a desire to succeed. 4-H is about more than winning. These parents make outstanding candidates for supporting activities where cooperation, education, and life-skill development are the goals, such as an educational camp as opposed to a competition (Bovitz & Toretta, 2005).

## Benefits of Parent Engagement

Parent engagement positively impacts youth, parents, and the club leader. It has been shown that increased parental involvement results in increased youth success. Not only will youth be more successful, but enhanced parent and club leader satisfaction and improved club atmosphere will also result (Bunijevac & Durisic, 2017). Youth whose parents support their 4-H experience are more likely to continue in 4-H (Homan, 2006).

Looking at club parents as partners can help the club leader feel less overwhelmed. There are so many things for a club leader to consider when planning programming for their club. If a club leader can cultivate a partnership with parents, not only will their job become more enjoyable, but the youth's experience likely will be more impactful.

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