

The Value of Teen Leadership

Tonya T. Price, Associate Professor and Virginia Cooperative Extension Specialist, 4-H
Bethany Eigel, Virginia Cooperative Extension Agent, 4-H, Chesterfield County
Sarah Pratt, Virginia Cooperative Extension Associate Agent, 4-H, Giles County
Hannah Robbins, Virginia Cooperative Extension Associate Agent, 4-H, Dinwiddie County
Marie Rothwell, Virginia Cooperative Extension Agent, Augusta County

During the summer months of 2017, a team of Virginia Cooperative Extension 4-H Extension agents and a 4-H Extension specialist surveyed currently active teen 4-H members and their parents/guardians to gather insight on (1) how they became involved in 4-H, (2) what keeps them engaged in the program, (3) what they have learned as a result of their participation, (4) how they are using what they have learned, and (5) their familiarity with the variety of opportunities available to teen 4-H members. As a result, 233 teens and 388 parents/guardians responded to the survey. The respondents represented the four districts of Virginia Cooperative Extension and 71 of the 106 counties and cities in Virginia.

The age range of teen respondents was 13-19 years old. The most common age (the mode) of teen respondents was 14 (24%), closely followed by those who were 17 years old (22%). The highest percentage of respondents began their 4-H membership as Cloverbuds. More specifically, 25% began between the ages of 5 and 8 (Cloverbuds), and 23% joined 4-H at age 9.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into perceived life skills development of Virginia 4-H teen members and their parents/guardians as a result of their participation in Virginia 4-H. The study was designed to determine if teens and/or their parents/guardians perceived that the teens had gained life skills through 4-H participation and, if so, how they are using these skills.

The population for this study was current, active, Virginia 4-H teen members, and their parents/guardians. Using 4HOnline data, the survey was sent to all teen members and their parents/guardians. A total of 621 responses were received (233 teen respondents and 388 parent/guardian responses) out of a possible 2,435, which is a 26% return rate.

How Teens Became Involved in 4-H

Of the 194 completed teen surveys (39 didn't respond to this question), 28% first became involved in 4-H through the camping program, closely followed by 4-H club involvement (26%). Encouragement from parents/guardians and/or friends was also a factor: 14% became involved because of their parent(s)/guardian(s) and 13% became involved through their friend(s). Ten percent indicated a school program as their source of recruitment, and 2% reported that they became involved because of 4-H advertising (see fig. 1 see page 2).

The 333 completed parent/guardian surveys (55 parents/guardians didn't respond to this question) differed slightly from those of the teens. According to 33% of parents/guardians surveyed, their teen first became involved in 4-H through the club setting. 4-H camp was the second highest rated response at 20%, closely followed by friends (18%) and parents/guardians (12%). School programs and other involvement were tied at 8%, and 4-H advertising was 1% (see fig. 2, see page 2).

Initial 4H Involvement – Parent/Guardian

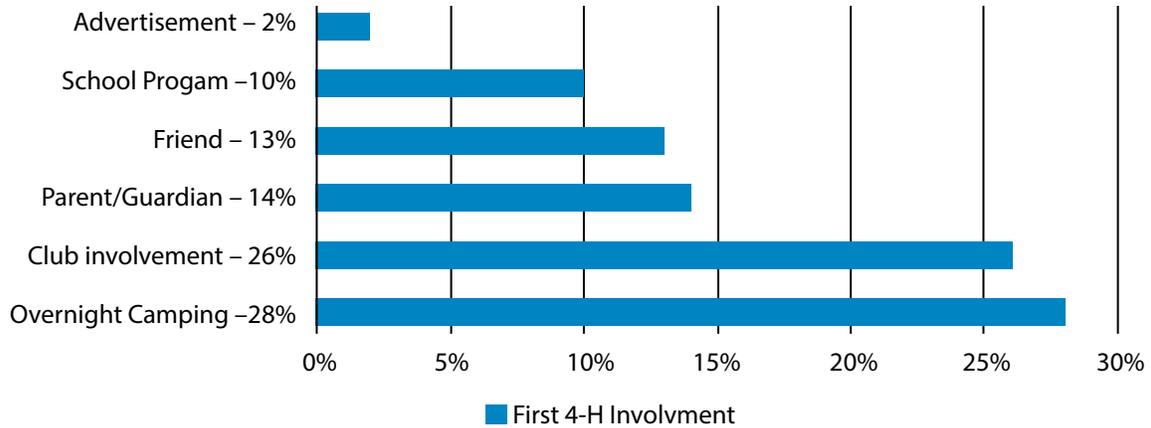


Figure 1. Initial 4-H involvement, teen responses.

Initial 4H Involvement – Parent/Guardian

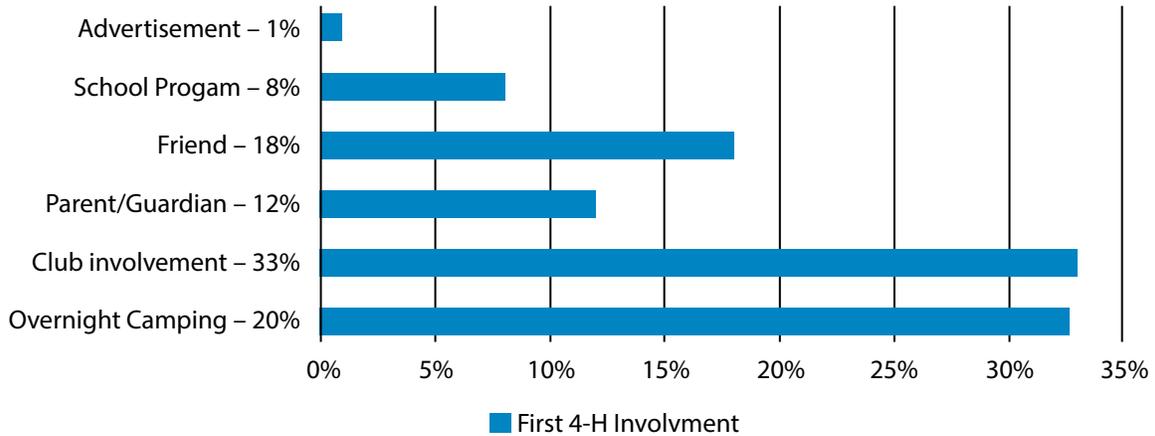


Figure 2. Initial 4-H involvement, parent/guardian responses.

What Keeps Teens Engaged in 4-H?

Research indicates that youth whose basic needs are met in positive ways are more likely to stay engaged and grow into active citizens and contributing members of their families and communities (Lerner and Lerner 2011). Combining 4-H club experiences with camping opportunities not only keeps members engaged, but also provides long-term relationships with caring adults. This adult mentorship helps teens learn new skills and grow in ways traditional educational experiences aren't designed to do.

An additional focus of this study was to determine what keeps teens engaged with the Virginia 4-H program, and respondents were allowed to check all options that applied. This generated a total of 2,869 responses from the 621 teens and parents/guardians who participated in the survey. While there were some differences in what teens viewed as significant in comparison to parents/guardians, overall a strong trend emerged for those components selected as the most important.

Of 1,174 teen responses addressing what keeps them involved, the three options selected most were fun (13%), making friends (12%), and leadership skill development (12%). Several other components also ranked high, such as trying new things, opportunities, camp, and clubs, which each drew about 9.5% of responses. Only 2.5% of teens

felt that parents/guardians had an impact on their 4-H involvement, which was the option selected least from those offered (see fig. 3).

Of 1,695 parent/guardians responses addressing what they think keeps teens engaged in 4-H programming, the most frequently selected options were fun (13%), making friends (12%), and leadership skill development (12%). This response mirrored the teen data in regards to the top three components that contribute to teen engagement. Parents/guardians also placed a high value on 4-H clubs (11.6%) and providing teens with opportunities (10%). Interestingly, only 4% of parents/guardians chose their own influence as being a factor in teen involvement (see fig. 4).

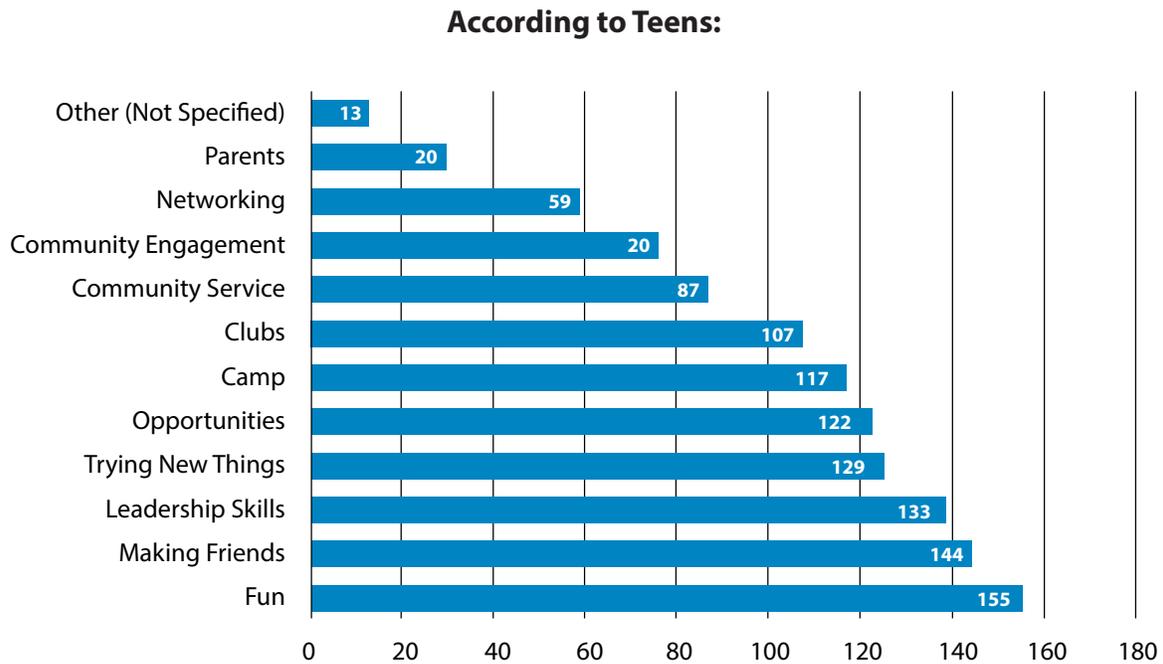


Figure 3. Engagement, teen responses.

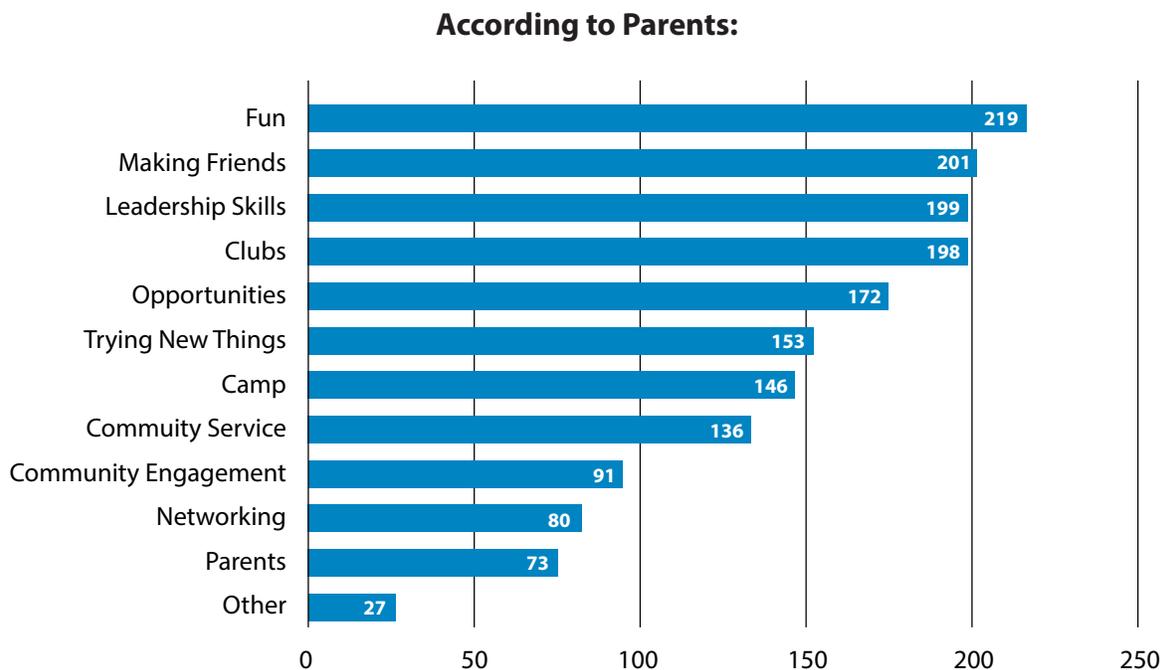


Figure 4. Engagement, parent/guardian responses.

Survey results indicate that families assign significant value to fun and friendship with regards to teen participation in Virginia 4-H. This is useful data to implement in recruiting and promoting 4-H Extension programs. Thus, it is suggested that websites and social media posts reflect these values and appeal to the teen demographic. It is also suggested that teens be encouraged to recruit friends to expand their 4-H club base and that club meetings/programs incorporate down time for teens to socialize and engage with one another.

The survey response selected least is an equally significant finding. Parental influence is a minor factor in teen involvement. Teens are asserting their opinions and making choices based on personal benefits such as friendships and leadership skills. This is a key stage in youth development that 4-H can foster by offering teens the opportunity to serve as leaders and to improve their critical thinking skills.

In addition to club meetings, it is important to facilitate purely social excursions for teens. Allow teens to take ownership of planning such activities. Socializing offers an informal opportunity for continued team building. Group-led activities such as a zip line park or an escape room require problem-solving and teamwork. If funding or availability is a major hurdle, there are other activities available locally at little to no cost, such as hiking a local trail, meeting at a park for a potluck picnic, or incorporating community service by walking dogs at a nearby shelter for a day.

The key is to allow teens to decide what they are interested in as it fits the personalities in the group. Just as in a workplace setting where employees are more likely to be engaged and productive if they enjoy their job, teens will perform at a higher level and develop more skills if the environment also allows for socialization and interaction with friends (De Guzman 2007).

What Life Skills Are Gained as a Result of 4-H Participation?

In determining what qualities and/or skills were gained by teens as a result of their participation in 4-H, parent/guardian perspective differed from that of their teens. However, both agreed that teens gain several life skills as a direct result of 4-H participation. Parents/guardians and teens were not limited in the number of skills they could select. The listed skills were based on the Life Skills Model created by Iowa State University in 1996 (Hendricks).

The skills selected most by teens were social skills (64%), followed by teamwork (62%), and communication (60%). These skills were closely followed by leadership (56%), self-responsibility (56%), and decision-making (53%). Fewer teens felt that disease prevention (16%) and resiliency (12%) were skills they had gained as a result of their participation in 4-H.

Parents/guardians provided a unique perspective when they were asked what life skills they felt their teen(s) developed as a result of their participation in 4-H. Teamwork was the No. 1 skill acknowledged by parents/guardians (58%). Teamwork was followed by social skills (56%), self-responsibility (54%), and communication (52%). Parents/guardians felt that stress management and disease prevention were the life skills that were least likely to have been influenced by 4-H participation, with only 1% choosing these options.

As seen in figure 5, there were some skills that teens attributed to 4-H participation but parents/guardians did not. A significant difference was found in the stress management life skill. Almost 30% of teens selected this option, ranking it much higher than many other life skills, compared to 9% of parents/guardians. Furthermore, there were two skills that parents/guardians selected significantly more than teens. Self-esteem was selected by 40% of parents/guardians and only 35% of teens, and resiliency was selected by 18% of parents/guardians and only 12% of teens. This could indicate that these skills are not often known to the individual, but more easily seen from an outside perspective.

The results of this study can be directly correlated with the “The Positive Development of Youth: Report of the Findings From the First Seven Years of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development by Tufts University (Lerner and Lerner 2011). In this study, youth involved with 4-H were compared to their peers and proven to excel. Researchers found that 4-H’ers are almost four times more likely to make contributions to their communities, nearly two times more likely to be civically active as well as active in science programs during out-of-school time, and almost two times more likely to make healthier choices. The report from Tufts University provides compelling evidence of the power 4-H participation has on youth in grades five to 12.

Life Skills Developed by Teens through Participation in 4-H

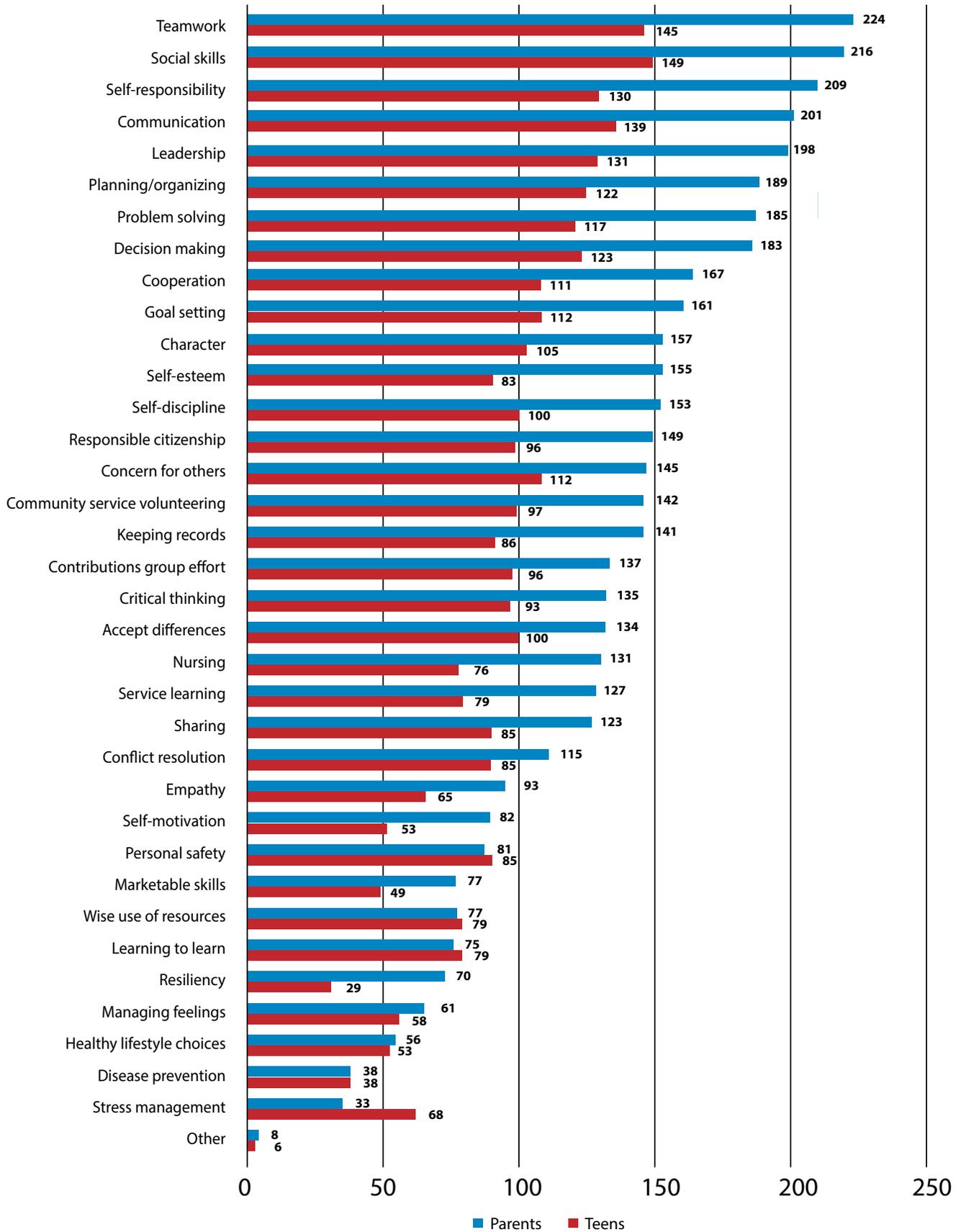


Figure 5. Life skills developed by teens through 4-H participation.

How Acquired Life Skills Are Used

Through the results of this study, the researchers gained insight into teens' perception of how they use life skills acquired through 4-H in the real world. Through an open-ended survey question, teens were able to report how they used their skills in other areas of their lives. Responses varied in nature. Teens mentioned using their skills in school, clubs, sports, and extracurricular activities and at work. Of the 194 teen respondents (39 didn't respond), the researchers found the following responses to be the most enlightening:

- “They help me with communication and help me solve problems that I sometimes experience in my life.”
- “School operates with the same kind of qualities, and they help prepare me for growing up. High school also made me use these skills I got from 4-H every day.”
- “At school and home — especially public speaking.”
- “It helped me get a job.”
- “Job interview, class presentations, conversation with others.”
- “4-H has changed me for the better to be able to talk to new people, get involved, and not to be scared to express my opinion.”
- “Yes, they help me in my high school career and will help me qualify for college scholarships.”
- “It's helped me with learning how to help other people with different leadership skills and develop citizenship skills outside, whether it's in school, church, or communities.”

Teens also reported using skills acquired from 4-H for relationships building, and in social settings. These results provided insight into how teens apply their skills in real-world applications.

Familiarity With 4-H Opportunities

Four-H provides many opportunities for teens to be involved and engaged beyond the local level. To gather insight on how familiar teens are with the opportunities afforded to them, they were asked to rate their familiarity with various 4-H teen opportunities using a Likert scale ranging from “extremely familiar” to “unfamiliar.” Of the 194 respondents (39 didn't respond to this question), 64% were familiar with camp counselor opportunities, 60% were extremely or very familiar with 4-H volunteer opportunities, and 40% were extremely or very familiar with 4-H judging.

Teens reported that they were unfamiliar with Citizenship Washington Focus (86%), International 4-H Youth Exchange Ambassador opportunities (81%), and Leadership Washington Focus (80%; see fig. 6 on page 7).

Of the 333 parents/guardians (55 didn't respond to this question) who rated their familiarity with 4-H's opportunities for teens, 52% were extremely or very familiar with camp counselor opportunities, 45% were extremely or very familiar with 4-H teen volunteer opportunities, and 35% were extremely or very familiar with 4-H judging. Parents/guardians were unfamiliar with the International 4-H Youth Exchange Ambassador program (77%), the Southern Region Teen Leadership Conference (70%), and Virginia Tech 4-H Collegiate Host Weekend (68%; see fig. 7 on page 7).

To help educate teens and adults on the various leadership opportunities available, agents can distribute the Virginia 4-H brochure “Opportunities for Senior 4-H Members” (Price 2016). Agents can also invite teens, volunteers, and Extension staff to local teen club meetings to speak about their leadership experiences from these programs and what they learned as a result.

Teen Familiarity with 4-H Opportunities

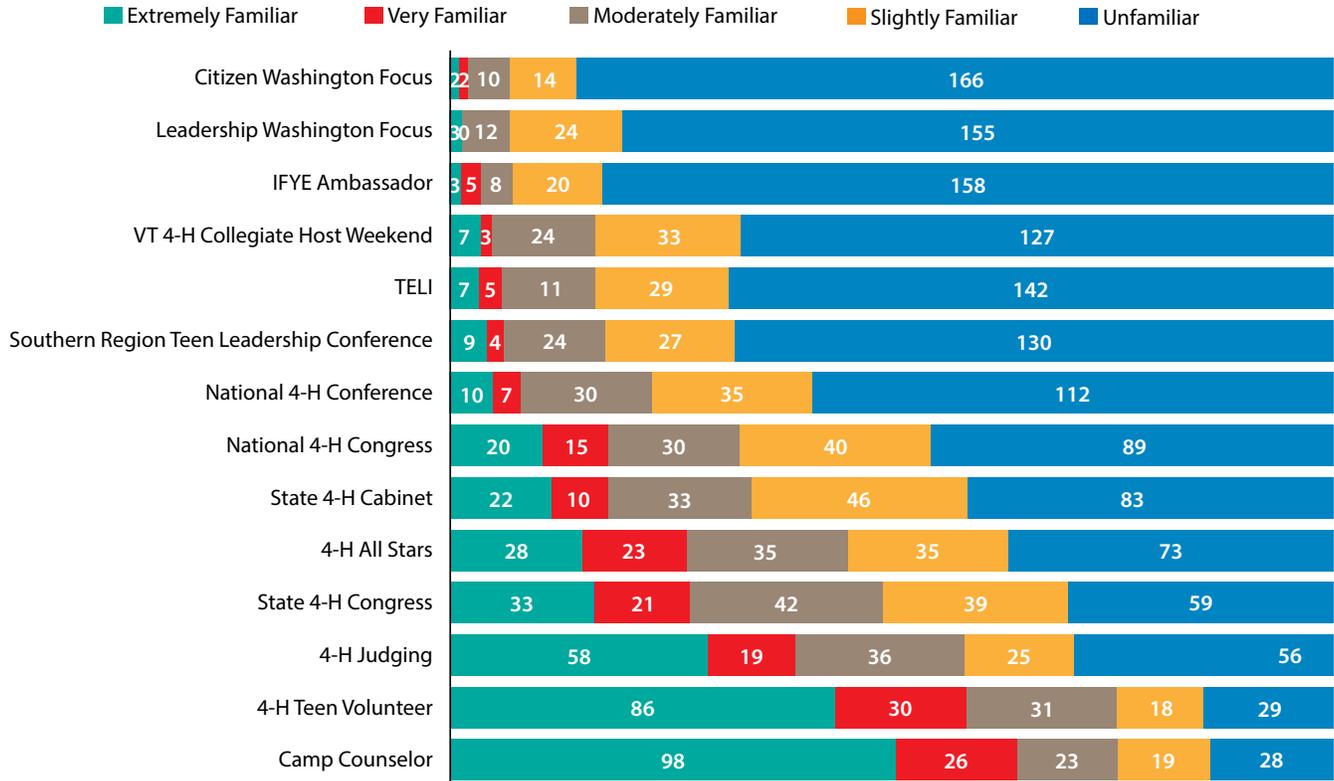


Figure 6. Familiarity with 4-H opportunities, teens.

Parent Familiarity with 4-H Teen Opportunities

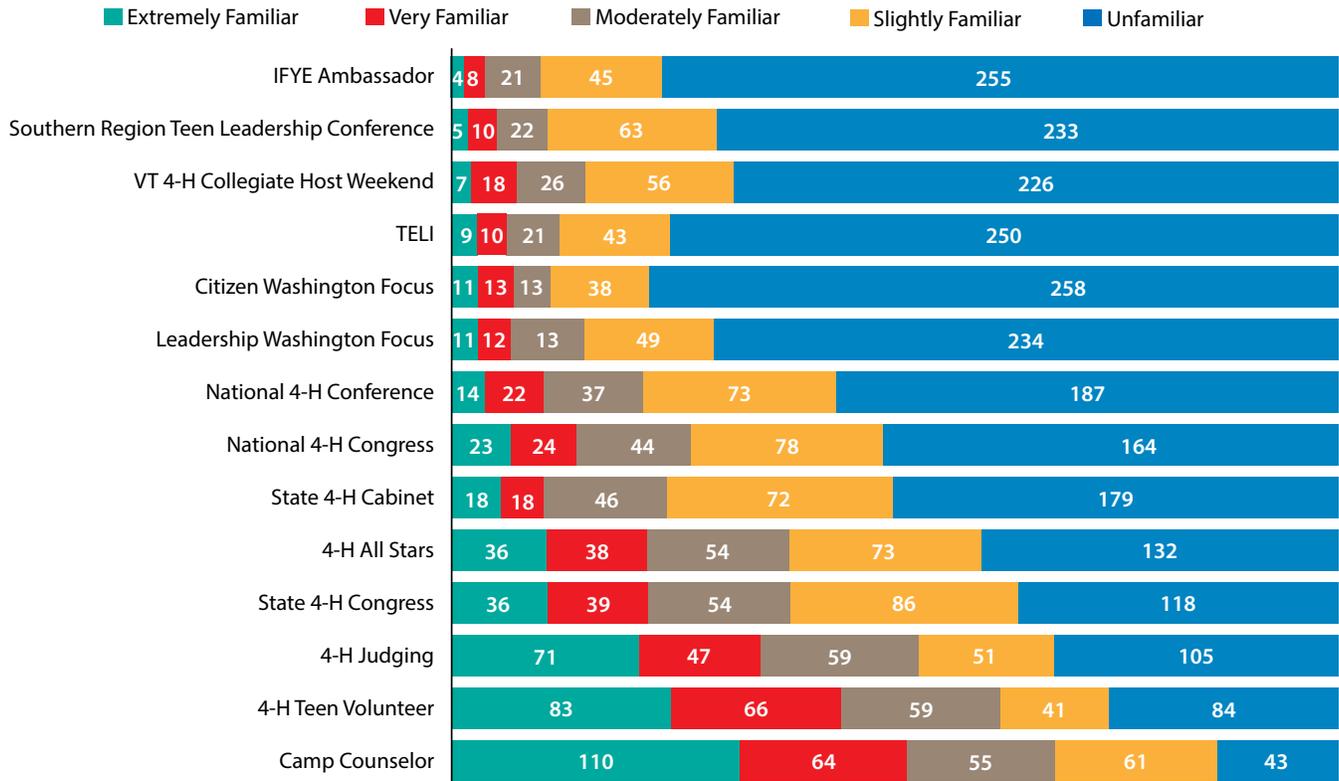


Figure 7. Familiarity with 4-H opportunities, parents/guardians.

Summary

In conclusion, the researchers think the findings from this study will be beneficial to all professionals working with 4-H youth. Using what was learned from this study and making changes at the unit level will help to ensure that 4-H youth stay engaged in the program and take advantage of the various opportunities available to them. Furthermore, more focus and attention targeted at the life skills that were not rated highly by participants can help make certain that 4-H professionals are developing well-rounded individuals who can transfer these skills into their everyday lives.

References

- De Guzman, M. 2007. *Friendships, Peer Influence, and Peer Pressure During the Teen Years*. NebGuide G1751. University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension. <http://extensionpublications.unl.edu/assets/pdf/g1751.pdf>.
- Hendricks, P. 1998. Developing Youth Curriculum Using the Targeting Life Skills Model. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/product/182>
- Lerner, R. M., and J. V. Lerner. 2011. *The Positive Development of Youth: Report of the Findings from the First Seven Years of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development*. Technical report. Tufts University Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development and National 4-H Council. <https://ase.tufts.edu/iaryd/documents/4HPYDStudyWave7.pdf>.