

Tips and Suggestions for how to help new 4-H members feel welcome to 4-H!

Remember back to some time as a young person, or even as an adult, walking into a room full of people where you didn't know anyone and just wanted to pretend you were invisible and stand against a wall. It wasn't a comfortable feeling, but after meeting other people during that first time, or after a couple of times, you began to enjoy the activities associated with the group.

One of the lifeskills that 4-H helps teach young people is the art of hospitality and making others feel welcome. Hospitality is making new guests as comfortable as possible, providing for their needs, and treating them as equals. This also includes understanding and being mindful of different cultures and subcultures and how we welcome new families to 4-H.

After thinking about your personal experiences in new environments, think about an eight year-old person that has learned about a fun and cool program called 4-H! They don't know anyone in 4-H, but know the first meeting of the year is tonight at the community center. The meeting is starting soon and the young person and their parent show up to learn about 4-H and see what it is all about. They have seen articles in the paper talking about all the projects a young person can participate in such as food & nutrition, raising animals for the fair, photography, but also things such as wildlife, computers, and even bicycles. While the young person lives in-town, an animal project is too big and foods and nutrition is not really their thing, the possibility of being in a computer project really makes them want to come and see what 4-H is all about and what they can do.

Beyond the young person being excited about coming to 4-H, the parent is excited to involve their child in a program that promotes itself as an organization ensuring a safe and positive environment. 4-H sounds just like the program that is going to help and offer a great experience for this young person and their family.

If this person walked into your 4-H club, how would

they feel? Would they feel welcome? Would they be greeted by another 4-H member, perhaps an officer? Would a club manager/leader introduce themselves to the young person, to the parent? How would your club introduce the new member during the roll call, or introduce any new members? Would your club describe ALL projects and opportunities that 4-H has, or would you tell them they have to do only a certain project – perhaps the one that the club manager likes?

Welcoming new 4-H members into our program is an important role of current 4-H members, parents, and volunteers. Look around the clubs in your county, what are the 4-H groups doing that are always getting the new members? You would probably see that they are a well organized club that makes new members, and parents, feel welcome. Too many times, we have a young person, or their parent, attend a club meeting and not be greeted, introduced, or not be able to ask, or get questions answered about the opportunities of 4-H. The great thing is helping a young person feel welcome is a easy thing for another 4-H member, an officer, and/or a leader to do.

Using some of the tips below, 4-H members can be a positive force in making a young person join 4-H and continue attending meetings. While a club could organize a formal welcome committee for new members, it is still every 4-H members and adults responsibility to extend a greeting and helping hand to a young person coming into their club.

Tips for welcoming a young person into 4-H:

- Have a designated 4-H member to greet and shake hands with all youth (4-H members and non-4-H members) walking into the meeting. Locate your greeter by the sign-in table or by the door.
- Have visitor badges/nametags for those attending for the first time so they can be greeted and welcomed.

- Organize, or appoint, a welcome committee of both youth and adults to greet new members and parents. Have them explain what is going to happen at the meeting (i.e. the motto, pledge, discuss club business, and then possibility focus your first program of the year on what 4-H has to offer in your club and county).
- Make the new member and/or parent feel comfortable enough to ask questions of the person(s) that welcomed them either during, or after, the meeting.
- Have a current 4-H member sit with a new member to answer questions they may have during the meeting. Have an adult do the same with the new parents.
- Ask them questions about themselves. Why are they interested in joining 4-H? What are their favorite things to do, or interested in? Are there any other youth at the meeting they know, perhaps from school or other places?
- If they tell you they are interested in a project that may not be offered currently in your 4-H club, don't tell them they can't do that particular project. Let them know that would be a new project for the club and the club will try to find an adult leader that may be interested in leading the project. You never know – there may be current 4-H members interested in the same project as the new member!
- Assign a "4-H Friend" that serves as a mentor for the 4-H member/family. Someone that will call them after the first meeting, ask if they have any questions, how did they like the first meeting, what they can do to help them in 4-H. Serve as a "4-H role model" for the new members.
- During the meeting have an opportunity for the young person to be introduced. This can be done in several different methods. For example, at the first meeting have your welcome committee/ person introduce the person to the club by telling their name and what school they attend, or something unique about them, but do not embarrass them. This allows for a young person that may be shy, not to have to stand up and speak at the first meeting. A young person could also stand up and tell their names and why they have decided to attend the 4-H meeting.
- Allow ALL the current 4-H members to stand up and introduce themselves. Don't make it a one-sided introduction by only having the new members stand up.
- Start your meeting with an Ice Breaker or activity that allows everyone to share their name.
- If your club has the financial resources, create a "New Member Kit" that contains information about the club leadership (officers, club managers, leaders), a county 4-H handbook, county 4-H newsletter, a writing pen/pencil, etc.
- When asked questions by new members or parents, be prepared to answer them to the best of your ability. Answer in a positive manner that allows the new 4-H member to understand. It may be that you need to contact the county Extension Office/Agent and see if there is a volunteer that can help with a particular project or follow up with the family on their questions.

These are just a few of the suggestions for making our new 4-H members feel welcome as they join 4-H. Regardless of your plans for welcoming 4-H members it is not a one month chore either. For some, becoming involved in 4-H can be overwhelming because of the number of projects and opportunities. Helping new 4-H families into the program is an on-going opportunity for club officers, older 4-H members, and adult leaders to strengthen the club's membership and helping young people know they are truly valued in the 4-H Program.



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