

Judging 4-H Projects



*Carl A. Broady, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development
Steven K. McKinley, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development*

The 4-H Youth Development program empowers young people to become independent, but that empowerment results from the involvement and effort of many people. Judges, parents, and leaders play key roles as 4-H members create experiences that build self-confidence, develop inquiring minds, encourage interpersonal cooperation, develop concern for the community, and teach decision-making. Also key is the 4-H members' understanding of the philosophy behind 4-H projects and judging. This publication describes that philosophy and the way we work together to put it into practice.

Philosophy of Judging in the 4-H Program

“To Make the Best Better”—our well-known 4-H motto—implies that we need to know what our best is before we can make it better. Our motto asks how well we’re doing now and encourages us to consider how we can improve. “To Make the Best Better” there must be evaluation (judging) that allows us to discover where we are and how well we’re doing.

Remember that the “best” we are striving to “make better” is young people—people who need to feel and know they are special, capable, and lovable. We are helping them achieve the best in themselves.

Keep in mind that the exhibit or project display is not an end in itself and does not illustrate all the learning that takes place in a 4-H project; it displays a portion of what the 4-H member is capable of doing and shows what he or she has accomplished and created.

The total development of the 4-H member is more important than the completion of a project or display. Creating, sharing, exhibiting, and judging projects can help members develop in positive and healthy ways. Through participation they gain insight into who they are and who they can become.

We use projects and records to help young people develop skills, gain knowledge, and build confidence, but we are always most concerned with the PERSON. In 4-H, people count!

Judging Defined

In 4-H, a judge evaluates (appraises or determines the merit or quality of) an exhibit, demonstration, or record in light of recognized standards. Then, the judge makes decisions and ribbon determinations based on recognized standards.

Conference judging, also known as *open or interview judging*, occurs when the member is present while the judge is evaluating the project. The judge talks with the 4-H member directly about the project the member completed.

Closed judging (behind closed doors) occurs on some projects, due to space or scheduling limitations and/or secrecy needs, and the judge writes comments on a scorecard.

Standards

For judging to be educational, it is important that judges use standards and not judge according to personal whims. Teaching standards is a basic tenet of 4-H Youth Development and an integral part of 4-H project work. Since the early 1900s, 4-H Youth Development has been helping communities and individuals learn up-to-date methods in agriculture and homemaking, which has raised the standards and hopes of all those involved.

What is a standard? A standard can be defined as:

- Something established for use as a rule or basis of comparison in measuring or

judging capacity, quantity, content and/or value.

- Something used by general agreement to determine whether or not an item is as it should be.

Think about these definitions in connection with 4-H projects. The standards for a meat-type hog or a Guernsey dairy calf would have characteristics that we all agree are required for a “standard” product. The standards for a loaf of bread would be determined in a similar way and could include golden brown color, smooth even texture, uniform shape, crack parallel on both sides, etc.

Standards are influenced by many things: advertising, friends, and tradition, for example. Standards vary widely and depend greatly on you, your resources, and the people with whom you associate. Where a used car may be “good enough” for some people, only a new car will do for others. The same holds true for a variety of other items where the individual has his or her own set of standards.

Standards can be determined in four ways.

Those four kinds of standards are:

- **Quality standards**—measuring the degree of perfection. Examples: a cake that is fluffy and moist or tomatoes that are firm and free of disease. (These standards are specified on the exhibit check sheet.)
- **Quantity standards**—the amount or number of something. Examples: six cookies, three articles of clothing that can form a complete outfit, or the number of inches of back fat.
- **Performance standards**—standards you set for yourself. (How much do you plan to do?) With a performance standard, there is always a minimum and a maximum standard on a continuum. Example: you set a low, medium, or high standard for cleaning your room.
- **Achievement standards**—objective measures of something you have done. Examples: playing a concert without an

error, making an “A” grade, or winning a blue ribbon. (These are all objective, tangible measures that you have achieved.)

The standards we hold up for ourselves don’t always apply to others. Quantity and quality standards may stay the same, but performance and achievement standards will vary considerably, depending on the age of the individual. A nine-year-old cannot be expected to perform at the same level as a sixteen-year-old. However, that doesn’t mean we must lower our standard for quality. As an example, the standard for muffins remains the same regardless of who bakes them, yet nobody expects a beginner to achieve the same results or performance level as an experienced cook.

We expect members to be able to verbalize their reasons for holding certain standards. This is what conference judging is all about. The basis of a judging contest is to learn to verbalize our standards and evaluate our own performance or the quality of a class. Learning to articulate our feelings and ideas is a big step forward in life skills.

The Danish System of Recognition

The Danish System recognizes and rewards young people for their efforts and projects. This system is designed to maintain a proper balance of competition and recognition. To be sure we use it properly, we must understand its operational procedures and philosophy.

What is the overall objective of the Danish System?

The Danish System is a method of evaluating class entries (projects or exhibitors) and placing them in groups according to standards developed for that class. The defined groups are designed to recognize youth for their achievement relative to set standards.

Why is the Danish System used in the 4-H program?

The Danish System distributes awards among those participating, thus providing recognition for the maximum number of participants. It is understood that recognition is a basic need of

all people (young and not-so-young), and public recognition can help to fulfill this basic need.

The Danish System recognizes minor differences between two or more entries. This system allows for those minor differences and attempts to provide opportunity for the maximum number of youth to be recognized.

How does the Danish System work?

An evaluation is made of each entry in a class. The class can then be subdivided into groups (outlined below). Consideration can be given to the age of the exhibitor, if the class is evaluated for showmanship.

A "modified group" method may be utilized when the individual entries within each group are further ranked in relation to their relative standing within each group.

What award levels are used in the Danish system?

The Danish system uses color to signify different award levels. The 4-H Youth Development program awards ribbons in these colors.

- **Purple (Superior):** A purple is awarded to those entries that far exceed the average standard or meet the standards established for that particular class. This award indicates a near perfect exhibit.
- **Blue (Excellent):** A blue is awarded to those entries that exceed the average standard. This award indicates a certain degree of excellence that exceeds the average expectation and may be given to multiple participants.
- **Red (Good):** A red is awarded to those entries that meet the average standard or are slightly below the average standard established for that respective class. The general level of accomplishment meets expectations, but is less than excellent. Shortcomings are found in certain aspects to cause this ranking.
- **White (Fair):** A white is awarded to those entries that do not meet average standard. The level of accomplishment is less than

expected. A ranking of white is deserved due to the severe shortcomings from the good standard.

- **Green (Participation):** A green is awarded when required components or pieces are missing from the exhibit (e.g., required three pieces of clothing for "Separates" category in the 4-H Sewing project and only two pieces are exhibited; or five different techniques in Advanced Cake Decorating Project, one from each category are required, but only four categories are met).

When using the Danish System:

- Items should be judged based on the outlined standards for the class. The standards must be applied equally to all. Entries are not judged against each other.
- The judge should not assume that an exhibitor is inexperienced due to age or mistakes that may occur.
- The exhibitor should not be judged when the class is designed for the evaluation of only the project.
- The judge should not assist exhibitors with the project prior to the exhibition or fair.
- A judge should not judge a class where he/she has sold an animal or project supplies to participants.

Problems may arise if:

- Exhibitors are not fairly evaluated against the standards.
- Application of standards is too rigid or too lax.
- Purple, blue, red, and white classifications are awarded based on a pre-determined formula for the number or percentage of each classification.
- Age and ability are not taken into consideration when a class is evaluated.
- Participants receive recognition they do not deserve.
- The judge is seen fraternizing with members and families of said class prior to exhibition.

Message to the Judges

As a judge, you can contribute significantly to the positive growth and development of 4-H members through the exhibit and judging process. In fact, the successful 4-H judge creates a positive and exciting atmosphere for members as they watch their projects being evaluated. You serve as a representative of the 4-H Youth Development program and of the outside world—a link between the 4-H project, the 4-H member, and a standard of performance.

We hope the information above and the points that follow will help you appropriately complete your role in the 4-H Youth Development program and uphold the purpose and value of 4-H Youth Development and 4-H project work.

- Interact with the child whenever possible, and discuss your observations and your judging philosophy. Discuss the standards you are using, the rationale for your standards, and how the standards you are using relate to real-life participation. A checklist or scorecard can help the members better understand the standards that apply to the project.
- Explain the value (weight) you are placing on various aspects of the project display. Explain why some parts of the display are more important than other parts or aspects. A scorecard or checklist will help.
- Focus on what the member has learned from completing the project and how the member can continue to grow through future participation in the project.
- Note the achievement and success of the 4-H member's investment no matter how small. Praise him or her for completing the project and taking the risk to show it to you.
- Judge the exhibit and the child's behavior or performance—not the 4-H member.
- Be familiar with the total 4-H project: goals, purposes, objectives, activities, and materials.
- Visit with the local Extension staff member and/or volunteer responsible for your project area prior to judging.
- Understand and be familiar with any guidelines, awards, etc., specific to the county.
- Use consistent scoring standards regarding the exhibit, and compare the exhibit to the general standards for judging. Avoid personal preferences. Use standards that are meaningful in reference to a typical home, farm, or work setting.
- Evaluate the efforts of the 4-H member by emphasizing stronger points or abilities demonstrated by the 4-H member. Also, offer constructive comments related to weaker points or abilities. Be sure to suggest ways the 4-H member can improve future exhibits. Help the 4-H member to realize his or her opportunity to grow through project participation. Avoid inappropriate, insensitive, or demeaning comments that could be harmful to the 4-H member's positive development, even if these comments are technically correct.
- Remember that the 4-H project exhibit must be the 4-H member's own original design and must not be plagiarized. Other exhibits may be used to generate ideas but should not be duplicated or otherwise represented as the member's original idea. It is not the 4-H judge's responsibility to actively seek out plagiarism, but if it is detected in the course of judging, the judge is asked to contact a 4-H Extension staff member to discuss further action that may be warranted.
- Judge the exhibit as an illustration of a 4-H member's achievements toward project goals and objectives. Based on county and/or state rules, a judge may want to discuss with a 4-H member his or her understanding of the project goals, objectives, activities, and exhibit development.
- Recognize the developmental level of the different ages of children. Comment on the achievements and successes of the child, taking into account the developmental ability of the 4-H member.*

° Judging essentials:

- a standard score card
- positive, constructive, and relevant written comments
- conference (or open) judging, whenever possible, and discussion of the exhibit with the 4-H member

* *The manual Ages and Stages of Child and Youth Development, NCR 292, is a 4-H publication that provides insight into the developmental levels of youth between the ages of 6 and 19.*

- ° Four important words:
 - FAIR
 - FIRM
 - FRIENDLY
 - CONSISTENT

Message to the 4-H Leader and Parent

Always remember that 4-H participation should be a positive learning experience. Work at creating a caring atmosphere where every 4-H member feels special, wanted, capable, and loved. Through relationships and dialog with you and other leaders and parents, 4-H members have the best opportunity to understand the value of 4-H and the role of 4-H projects and related judging activities. You can help young people interpret the judging experience in relevant and meaningful ways that help him or her experience self-recognition, self-satisfaction, self-worth, and a feeling of success by learning and competing in the project.

The following suggestions may help as you discuss 4-H projects and the process of judging with young people.

- Help young people understand the purpose of judging:
 - ° by evaluating a sample of the 4-H member's work,
 - ° by helping the member see progress he or she has made, and
 - ° by helping the member improve his or her skills.
- Help a 4-H member set realistic goals based on age, available resources, and time.
- Share your thinking and hopes, but be careful not to impose adult goals on 4-H members. A person's goals should be his or her own.
- Help the 4-H member understand the standards used to evaluate the 4-H project at both the county and the state level. Practice and prepare for conference judging and encourage record completion. Be prepared with terms, expectations, and standards for the exhibit.
- Be a coach and mentor. Help them learn the information in the project materials upon which the standard is based. You might use check sheets to review standards and teach members what to look for.
- Help the 4-H member understand that the 4-H project exhibit must be his or her own original design. Plagiarism is prohibited. Other exhibits may be used to generate ideas but should not be duplicated or otherwise represented as the member's original ideas. Projects that are deemed by 4-H Extension staff to show plagiarism will be disqualified from competition.
- Inform members of the "rules of the game." In other words, be certain the members understand things like eligibility, exhibit requirements, and your expectations.
- Help the 4-H member recognize good work. Point out work that you believe is good. Explain why you think it is good.
- Help the younger person recognize his or her accomplishments. Encourage 4-H members to do the work themselves to the best of their ability.
- Provide constructive criticism/feedback based on experience, standards, and guidelines—appropriate to the subject of the project and the age of the member.
- Recognize that there is more than one way to complete a 4-H project. Creativity is a valuable personal ability; encourage creativity in completing 4-H projects within the project boundaries.
- Help the 4-H member realize that the judge's comments are designed to help improve the exhibit and should not be taken personally. These comments should be based on standards even though people view things differently.
- In competitive events, avoid over-emphasis on the winner. Help the 4-H member accept the results of the competition and realize that everyone is a winner through his or her own accomplishments and efforts.

Your job is to show 4-H members that you are proud of their hard work and mastery of skills, rather than of ribbons awarded for an exhibit. If you do this, we are more likely to have emotionally healthy, successful 4-H members who enjoy competition and play fairly.

Message to the 4-H Member

It is up to you to learn from the judging experience; a parent, leader, or judge cannot learn for you. 4-H judging is intended to give guidance for your personal growth and to provide opportunities for improving your skills and abilities. A judging experience should help you learn to evaluate your own work. We realize that an exhibit does not measure or illustrate all that you achieved, but it is an example of what you accomplished.

As you go through the judging process keep the following in mind.

- Take time to evaluate your own project. What are the good points and where could you make improvements in the future?
- Remember that you can look at other projects to get ideas. But make sure to use your own original design for your exhibit. You cannot copy someone else's work and call it your own. That is called plagiarism, and it is not allowed. If you copy another exhibit and call it your own, your exhibit will be disqualified from competition.
- Think about what you've learned as a result of participating in this project. Did you achieve the goals you set for yourself? Why or why not?
- Accept constructive feedback; learn from it. You are responsible for your own actions and attitudes, so model to others the value of gathering information that can be used to improve skills and abilities.
- A judge's comments are meant to be helpful even though the judge was given the responsibility to critique the exhibits.
- Remember that abilities are often developed with age and the experiences that help you grow.
- Realize that people occasionally make mistakes and are entitled to your positive respect.
- Demonstrate good sportsmanship. Show positive appreciation and regard for the achievements of those whose projects placed higher than yours. Be proud of your accomplishments and your achievements.

Judging is hard work, maybe even harder than completing the project. It is only because the judges believe in youth, 4-H members, and the 4-H opportunity that they agree to judge hundreds of projects and provide comments that are meant to help you, the 4-H member, have a positive chance to grow through the 4-H program. Understand that they are making an investment in you. Appreciate their effort.



Summary

The attitudes parents, leaders, judges, and members have toward judging are critical for the effectiveness of the 4-H program. Judging should be a positive experience that reinforces learning for members. Together we can make the judging process work in the best interests of the growth and development of 4-H members.

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