



# Youth Livestock Exhibitors as Ambassadors for Animal Agriculture

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Young people participate in youth livestock programs for a variety of reasons. For many it is a family tradition, while for others it is the love of animals that gets them involved. Whatever the reason, the benefits are undeniable. Youth learn many life skills that help them personally and, eventually, in their chosen professions (Rusk et al., 2003). Perhaps the most important skill they learn is the responsibility of something other than self. Youth realize that each animal depends on them to supply all nutrition and health care, and that they are responsible for the well-being and productivity of their livestock.

For many participants, the show ring is the place to display what they have learned. It is also a time to compete against their friends. Whether it is the county fair, state fair, or a regional or national show, youth must realize that people are watching them. Those people can include younger 4-H/FFA members that are learning what to do and members of the general public who came to the fair for the carnival rides and are now intrigued by the animal exhibits. But it can also include people opposed to animal agriculture who are waiting for something to exploit.

Because of this increased scrutiny, it is essential to understand the following guidelines in preparation for exhibition. Failure to do so may lead to negative perceptions of the livestock industry and lessened consumer confidence in the food supply, which could undermine the objectives of youth livestock programs (Goodwin et al., 2002).

- ✓ ***Be sure the animal is ready to show.*** Work hard at home to make sure the animal is properly trained and comfortable around other animals and crowds of people. Getting loose in the show ring is one of the worst things that can happen. If an animal is spooked, people could have misconceptions about all animals' temperaments. Be willing to make the tough decision to leave an animal at home if it is not ready for public display.
- ✓ ***Watch for stress. Be sure that the animal does not get overheated or overly tired.*** Always provide adequate feed and water, and avoid the use of muzzles and non-medical drenching. If animals appear overly stressed before showing, leave them in the pen to avoid a problem in the show ring. Refrain from slapping or striking animals in the show ring. Aggression toward the animal causes stress and can lead to negative perceptions by the audience.
- ✓ ***Do not use unapproved feed additives or pharmaceuticals.*** Follow the label instructions and quality assurance guidelines for every product that is used. Using a product in a way other than the label or a veterinarian prescribes is illegal and can be dangerous. Follow withdrawal times carefully to ensure that market animals are free of residues as they are likely to enter the food chain.

✓ **Refrain from grooming and fitting that misrepresents your animal.** It is unethical, could create an embarrassing situation, and will carry over into other parts of life. Do not cut corners. Instead, be willing to work hard, and be gracious in winning and losing. Learn from shortcomings, and apply what you learn toward improving for the next show.

It is extremely important to be able to explain to the general public why you are involved in youth livestock projects and what you have learned through this experience. Be ready to tell people how you care for your animals, what you feed them, and how you keep them healthy. Inform others about all the products that animals provide for our everyday lives. By following the above recommendations, you will be an ambassador for animal agriculture.

In addition to these actions, youth should always observe the protocols in place at livestock shows that provide quality assurance and promote consumer confidence in youth livestock programs and animal agriculture. One such protocol is the drug-testing program, which is designed to prevent problems rather than catch violators. This is an example of animal agriculturists policing themselves and proving to the public they will not tolerate animal abuse or misuse.

The drug-testing program at the Indiana State Fair 4-H shows requires youth to demonstrate responsible animal care as they raise and exhibit

their animals. Since the meat from all harvested 4-H champion market animals will be offered for sale to the public, this also helps ensure that 4-H animals which enter the food chain meet current food-safety guidelines.

But while the drug-testing program helps promote quality assurance, ultimately all individuals involved in 4-H Food Animal projects have a responsibility to make sure that their animals have been raised using management practices that are compliant with federal food safety policies. Any food-safety issue with 4-H project animals would be detrimental to the Purdue University 4-H Youth Livestock Program; thus, it is crucial that animals be free of drug residues and safe for consumption. Remember, ethically treated animals will always be safe for human consumption and are a perfect example of youth livestock program success.

## References

Goodwin, J. L., T. H. Murphy, and G. Briers. 2002. Measuring the Ethical Cognition of a Videotape Livestock Show Ethics Education Program. *Journal of Extension* 40(6).

Rusk, C. P., J. M. Summerlot-Early, K. L. Machtmes, B. A. Talbert, and M. A. Balschweid. 2003. The Impact of Raising and Exhibiting Selected 4-H Livestock Projects on the Development of Life and Project Skills. *Journal of Agricultural Education* 44(3):1-11.

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