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When people see the 4-H emblem, the green clover with four white H's, they get a pretty good feeling. The iconic 4-H clover has long been associated with memories of county fairs, summer camps, and lifelong friendships. We know that people think that 4-H is a good thing, but we have never truly put a finger on exactly why- until now.

Recently, 2,600-plus Kansas youth ages 8-18 years old -- from both rural areas and cities -- participated in a study to determine 4-H's effectiveness in fostering positive connections, encouraging responsible decisions, and developing communication and citizenship skills.

"We've always known that 4-H makes inroads in helping young people grow into tomorrow's leaders," said Barbara Stone, a professor of educational leadership in the Department of 4-H Youth Development at Kansas State University. "But we didn't know how much. So we conducted a study by involving many of the local extension agents across Kansas."

Gaining skills and self-confidence through community service, as well as a desire to help others, were all reported by well over 90 percent of the survey respondents. Kansas 4-H has often been credited with instilling strong leadership skills in young people, and this impact study marks the first time program leaders have concrete evidence.

Now, when people see the 4-H clover, we know that there are permanent, measurable reasons for the "good feelings" that are associated with it. 4-H learning experiences enhance young people's abilities to grow into tomorrow's leaders and communicators. The structured learning environment combined with encouragement and mentoring allows 4-H programming to play a vital role in helping our youth achieve future success. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

Adapted from "4-H benefits Kansas youths in measurable, permanent ways" by Randall Kowalik.

An American youth development organization with global reach, 4-H empowers young people with skills that have lifelong value. With guidance from adult mentors, young people in 4-H learn science, health, citizenship and more through hands-on projects. Kansas 4-H is delivered by K-State Research and Extension. In Kansas, more than 86,000 young people are involved in 4-H activities. About 2,600 youths between the ages of 8 and 18 were surveyed, representing both rural and urban 4-H members.

"The success, skills, leadership and citizenship that youth find through the 4-H program follow them into their adult lives," said Jill Martinson, a 4-H youth development agent with K-State Research and Extension's Dickinson County office. "We have farmers and ranchers who first raised livestock or crops as 4-H projects, a local bakery and bistro owner who found her passion in the 4-H foods project, a former state energy management 4-H project winner who now engineers stage performances for big-name entertainers, a photography project member who is now a graphic designer for a high-end furniture company, as well as hundreds of others who have become successful, community-minded adults because of their involvement in 4-H."