



## 4-H ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

# Introduction to BIG-M

### What is BIG-M?

You might have heard a lot of talk about Positive Youth Development, 4-H Essential Elements and now the new configuration of the 8 Essential Elements as BIG-M: Belonging-Independence-Generosity, and Mastery. While we sometimes like things to stay the same, knowledge and youth development practice is constantly evolving. In fact, this is an exciting time as research on positive outcomes resulting from participation in youth programs is growing.

The conceptualization of BIG-M distills the previous 8 Essential Elements into four broad, fundamental ideas. Belonging, Independence, Generosity, and Mastery are the four key concepts that most directly align with the historical roots of 4H and current research in human development and learning. These four concepts create the underlying positive structure for participation in 4-H youth development activities. Under these four Key Concepts of BIG-M, the 8 Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development are defined.

For those of us who have worked with youth for many years, there is a natural tendency to see these essential elements as obvious, inherent, and automatic. We've seen the positive results and we focus our energies on making sure the programs happen. At times the logistics and coordination of activities are so demanding that we just celebrate the success of making it all happen for another year! However, researchers' careful analysis of youth programs indicates that creating positive program outcomes isn't automatic, it must be intentional. We know that program quality varies a lot. In fact, poorly designed activities and settings can even have a negative influence on youth.

We no longer talk just about positive developmental outcomes, but about the kinds of program features and youth experiences that influence or produce those positive outcomes. Belonging, Independence, Generosity, and Mastery are foundational program features or key concepts that guide our work with youth

in 4H. They are the cornerstones. As researchers continue to study 4-H and other youth development programs, more key ideas will emerge, but for now we are focusing on BIG-M and the 8 Essential Elements defining BIG-M.

Belonging, Independence, Generosity, and Mastery are overriding concepts that apply to a lot of different things that we do. They are complex principles. For example, Mastery isn't just tied to completing and exhibiting a project. And, Generosity isn't just participating in a service project. While these activities are important, BIG-M focuses our attention on more than just activities and our common practices. It's about how and why we do them. These key concepts have implications for all that we do in creating meaningful learning experiences for youth. They apply to:

- how we talk to and coach youth,
- what we focus on in club meetings and activities,
- helping youth express their interests,
- how youth relate to each other, and
- the opportunities youth create for themselves.

### What does this mean for me?

Whether you are just starting out as a 4-H leader or are a well seasoned volunteer who has been doing this 4H stuff for years, you should find that the activities and discussions regarding positive youth development foster reflection on the things that matter. The BIG-M principles apply to how we carry out our program activities. We know that being a 4H leader isn't just doing the same things from year to year. Sure, we have lots of great traditions, but being a leader is also about managing unexpected situations and sometimes conflicts. A sound understanding of BIG-M will help you build your skills as a leader and a decision maker.

Remember, as adults, we are always growing and developing, too. Take some time to think about your practice as a 4-H leader and to be open to deepening and enriching your understanding of Belonging, Independence, Generosity, and Mastery.

Author: Cheryl Baldwin, Extension Specialist 4-H Youth Development Community Approaches  
University of Illinois Extension, Freeport Center

February 2010

