

New  
Jersey **4-H**

## Leader Training Series



### Learn by Doing the 4-H Way

#### Putting a Slogan into Practice



#### The Experiential Learning Process

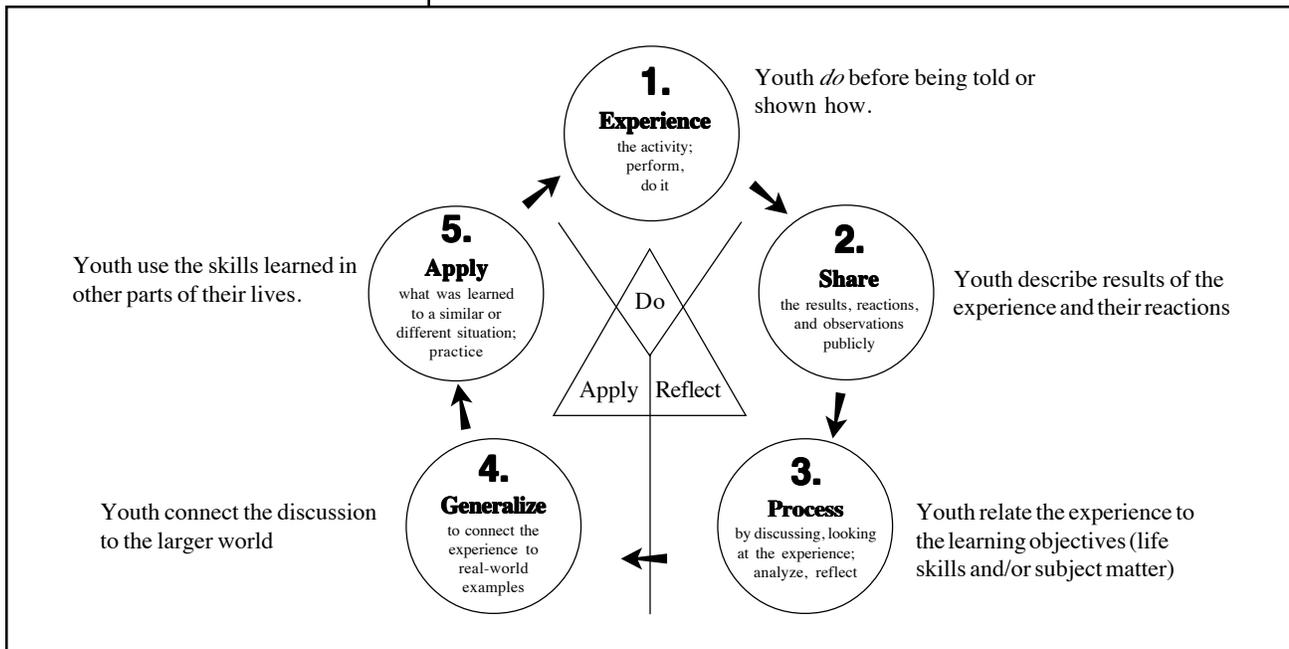
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“Learn by doing” is a commonly used expression in 4-H. Indeed, the 4-H program has a reputation for using a learn-by-doing approach for teaching youth. Although learning by doing has been the core of how 4-H teaches kids since its beginning in the early 1900’s, 4-H has more recently adopted an official model to depict this process. An understanding of this process called “experiential learning” will help new and experienced leaders provide 4-H members with rewarding and fun experiences. As you begin to use this process, it may take more time to prepare than a lecture or a demonstration for a club meeting. Yet, you will soon find the time spent is well worth the effort.

This information sheet will introduce you to the National 4-H Experiential Learning Model, where youth first experience then reflect on the new knowledge, and finally apply knowledge and skills learned to other life situations.

The “learn-by-doing” approach allows youth to experience something with minimal guidance from an adult. Instead of being told “the answers,” they are presented with a question, problem, situation, or activity which they must make sense of for themselves. Learning by doing is called “experiential learning” because it is based on learning from experiences.

Here is a diagram of the Experiential Learning Process used by 4-H:



## Steps to Follow - Putting the Experiential Learning Process Into Action

First, it is important to review the lesson and any accompanying materials, and practice the activities to be taught. As a group leader, the adult should help guide youth in a process through which they can propose hypotheses and determine their own “solutions.” The experiential learning model contains five steps but can be summarized into three main processes: Do, Reflect, and Apply. Not every step of the process is done for every activity and sometimes steps within each of the three are combined. However, it is important to complete the three main processes of the learning cycle by the time the total lesson unit is completed.

Below are the roles of youth and adult leaders in each of the steps of the experiential learning process:

### Do

#### 1. Experience (Doing)

*Leader:* Describe the experience or activity you will have youth do before they are told or shown how. Encourage youth to think about what they might see or what might happen by asking questions such as “What do you expect to see?” or “Write down your hypothesis or prediction of what might happen here.”

*Youth:* Experience the activity: perform, do it. Except for basic instructions on organization, safety, or time requirements, youth “do” before being told or shown how.

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**Reflect**

*These two steps provide an opportunity for youth to develop logical thoughts, verbalize those thoughts, relate to others in the group, and compare experiences and opinions. It is important to promote an atmosphere of acceptance of individual participants and diverse thinking.*

**2. Share (What happened?)**

*Leader:* Develop questions you will ask the students about their experience and their reaction to it after they have completed the activity.

*Youth:* Share the results, reactions, and observations publicly. Youth describe the results of the experience and their reactions.

**3. Process (What's important?)**

*Leader:* Develop questions that you will ask the students about something they felt was important about the experience.

*Youth:* Process by discussing, looking at the experience; analyzing, reflecting. Youth relate the experience to the targeted subject matter and life skills being learned.

**Apply**

*The final two steps provide activities or questions for youth to help summarize what they have experienced. It enables them to generalize what they have learned to other examples and situations.*

**4. Generalize (So what?)**

*Leader:* Develop questions that will ask the students how the experience related to their own lives.

*Youth:* Generalize to connect the experience to real-world examples. Youth connect the subject matter and life skill discussion to the larger world.

**5. Apply (Now what?)**

*Leader:* Develop questions that ask the students how they could apply what they learned to a similar or different situation.

*Youth:* Apply what was learned to a similar or different situation; practice. Youth use the new subject matter and life skill experiences in other parts of their lives.

**Asking Questions**

One of the most important roles of the adult group leader is to stimulate youth to think about “Why?” and “How?” and “What if?”

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## Integrating Life Skills Into Experiential Learning

Asking open-ended questions along the way helps challenge youth to think. This also provides opportunities to evaluate their experience and progress along the way.

Boys and girls are attracted to 4-H because they will make and do things by participating in 4-H projects and activities offered in clubs, camps, and other groups. However, when working with youth, it is equally important to emphasize the teaching of “life skills.” These are important in helping young people become self-directing, productive, contributing members of society. They are a broad range of skills that are considered life-long needs and important attributes in career exploration and workforce preparation. These life skills have been subdivided into the following five categories:

- **Enhance Learning Skills**, such as capitalizing on curiosity, coping with change, identifying sources of knowledge, developing psychomotor skills (strength and endurance, coordination, and precision).
- **Strengthen and Use Decision Making Skills**, such as assessing needs and interests using resources (time, energy, talents, and money) wisely, establishing goals and priorities.
- **Develop a Positive Self-Concept.** Self-concept is an emerging belief about oneself that contributes to one’s ability to cope successfully with issues in one’s life, and eventually making a positive impact on the lives of others.
- **Communicate With and Relate to Other People.** Develop communication skills that enhance the ability to understand and respect what was said with the openness to develop another point of view. This includes: verbal and non-verbal communication, record-keeping practice, social skills such as tact/diplomacy, making friends, negotiation, and conflict management.
- **Respond to the Needs of Others and the Community** in which they live, to become aware of the concerns of the people who live there, and take appropriate action. This includes: nurturing others in a manner that respects their values and concerns, accepting responsibilities for individual and group goals within the family, club and community setting; and citizenship participation responsibilities.

For more information about teaching life skills, refer to *Life Skills in the 4-H Program*.

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## An Example

To illustrate how the experiential learning process can be used with a lesson you might teach with a group of 4-H members, here is a simple example adapted from an activity in the NJ 4-H Science Discovery Series:

### **Lesson title: Let's talk trash!**

#### Subject Matter Objectives

*Youth will learn:*

- A basic understanding of how the garbage they produce has an impact on the environment.
- The basics of the 3R's - Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.
- How they can make a difference by reducing the amount of garbage going into landfills.

#### Life Skills Taught

*Youth will:*

- Enhance Learning Skills
- Strengthen and Use Decision Making Skills
- Respond to the Needs of Others and the Community

### **Activity Background**

Some products we buy take years to decompose. This means we use our land for landfills and pollute our environment. (A separate activity in the NJ 4-H Science Discovery Series that helps youth understand the significance of this would be a good lead-in to this lesson.) There are many ways to cut down on the amount of garbage we throw away each day. In general, everyone should follow the rule of the 3 R's: Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. *Reduce* the amount of garbage you produce by purchasing products with little packaging. Buy items that you can *Reuse* many times, such as sponges, rechargeable batteries, and cloth napkins. *Recycle* food scraps by creating a compost pile, and find other ways to recycle other items instead of throwing them away. By gaining an awareness of ways in which we can reduce the amount of trash we produce, we can lessen the impact that we have on the environment.

### **Lesson Outline**

#### *1. Experience (Doing)*

Take a trip to the grocery store and observe the different ways in which items are packaged. Note which items have the most and the least packaging, and which items have packaging that is more easily recycled. Keep track of items used by their own families.

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*2. Share (What happened?)*

Have members explain what they noticed while looking at packaging of products.

*3. Process (What's important?)*

Did some products have more packaging than necessary? Was all the packaging recyclable or biodegradable? Do any use harmful materials that should not be disposed? Do you realize that decisions you make affect others and the environment? Making a difference can be done one person, one family, one house at a time!

*4. Generalize (So what?)*

Ask the group if there are ways to cut back on the amount of packaging. What could they do differently in their own families' buying habits? In what way would they change what they buy?

*5. Apply (Now what?)*

Discuss steps that a family could take to change the way in which they purchase things in order to have less of a negative impact on the environment. As a follow-up activity, have members keep a record of what items their families purchased during the next big shopping trip. Measure how much garbage was produced by their families for one week. Compare the difference in the amount of garbage thrown away before and after taking steps to follow the 3 R's - Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. What other differences could they make in their lives by thinking of similar, simple improvements they could accomplish?

It might take more preparation, but the rewards for both the adult leader and 4-H members are potentially significant. Consider the following in your decision:

**Advantages**

1. Increased use of multiple senses (sight, sound, etc.) can increase retention on what is learned.
2. Multiple teaching/learning methods can be integrated to maximize creativity and flexibility.

**Summary: Should I use experiential learning?**

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3. Focuses on learning more from view of the 4-H member, less from the adult's perspective.
  4. Process of "discovery" of knowledge and solutions builds self-esteem.
  5. Learning is more fun for members, teaching more fun for leaders.
  6. If youth are actively engaged in learning, they have more stake in the outcome of what they learn and are less likely to become discipline problems.
  7. Other life skills can be learned, instead of merely subject matter content.

### **Disadvantages**

1. Requires preparation by leader.
2. Requires patience and guidance by leader. Decentralized approach can seem less orderly, may be less comfortable to an authoritarian-style leader.
3. There is often no single, "right" answer.

## **References**

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