



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

## 4-H fosters the sense of belonging necessary for wellbeing

Everyone has a fundamental need to feel a part of a group such as a family, a group of friends, or a team. In the 4-H world, it is referred to as a “sense of belonging.” Fostering a sense of belonging is one of the main priorities of the 4-H program within the Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit, as well as across the state. No matter the type of 4-H experience, youth are positively impacted by those feelings of being a part of something bigger than themselves, having shared experiences, and being accepted and respected in a group.

The [4-H club program](#) offers the possibility of the most sustained sense of belonging, with clubs meeting throughout the year, and club members often maintaining participation over the course of several years. These groups build connection and belonging by cultivating shared experiences, such as community service projects, learning opportunities, [showcase events](#), and recitation of the [4-H Pledge](#). A 2019 survey asked 4-H club members in Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties about aspects of belonging in their club and found:

- 95% felt welcomed
- 96% felt safe
- 86% felt supported by other kids in 4-H
- 86% felt like they mattered in 4-H

Even though our local summer programs, [4G STEM Camp](#) and [STEM Academy](#), are respectively focused on career exploration and building science skills, they also foster connection through icebreaker games, small group discussions, and group activities. Consequently, 90% of parents responding to a 2022 survey indicated that these programs helped their child(ren) make new friends.

Young people who participate in the statewide residential camp, [4-H Memorial Camp](#), often experience opportunities for this type of connection through communal meals, shared living spaces, and novel collective experiences. Indeed, when the 2022 participants (to date) were asked about their favorite part of camp, 43% of them responded to this open-ended question with some reference to bonding with friends, meeting new people, or other types of personal connection. This was the most common response, with references far outnumbering any particular activity or event that took place at camp.

This need to belong is [hardwired into our brains](#), and is linked to a wide array of positive outcomes, such as [higher productivity at work](#), [increased motivation](#), and [lower risk of depression](#).

In young people, a sense of belonging is linked to [increased protective factors and decreased risk taking activities](#). The [Student Experience Research Network](#) even found that students with a sense of belonging [do better in school](#), academically and behaviorally. For this reason, fostering a sense of belonging is one of the main priorities of 4-H programs, and is done in a variety of ways best suited to the type of program.

The sense of belonging is a necessary component of wellbeing, and the variety of 4-H programs cultivate this to help young people thrive.



*Through a 4-H window display the Elmwood All-Stars touted the feelings of connection that are cultivated in 4-H Clubs by stating, “We are better together.” This simple yet poignant sentiment sums up true power of belonging that is substantiated by research and, more importantly, experienced by youth in 4-H.*

**Emily Schoenfelder**

4-H Youth  
Development Educator  
eschoe@illinois.edu