



Take a Little Stress Out of Getting Ready for the Fair

Joshua finished the display in the van on the way to the fair, Nicole stayed up most of the night to complete an exhibit, Morgan's parents had to make a mad dash to the local store for supplies, and John and his parents exchanged harsh words.

Getting ready for the 4-H fair can cause lots of stress in a household. Of course, any event that gets this much publicity and is to be the culmination a year of learning is bound to be filled with strong emotions. And even though it's the 4-H member and his/her project that is being evaluated, parents and even leaders may at least subconsciously view the success of the 4-H'er and his/her project as a reflection on their ability.

So, how can we lower the stress level of preparing for the fair?

First, try to put the 4-H fair in perspective. The county 4-H fair is only one part of the total 4-H learning experience. Serving as an officer or on a committee, giving a talk or demonstration, going to a project meeting or workshop, completing activities from a project activity guide, and going to camp are only a few of the hundreds of experiences a 4-H'er learns from throughout the year. Yes, the fair is a special part of the 4-H experience, but it is not the only part. The development of young people is our first consideration in 4-H work. We are more concerned about what the 4-H'er learns than with the exhibit. Project exhibits are a means to an end – not an end in themselves. Leaders and parents need to help each 4-H member set realistic goals for himself/herself according to his/her own age and experience.

Probably the most obvious way to decrease stress is to encourage club members to start early preparing their exhibit. If it's only a couple of weeks before the fair when you read this, the suggestion may still be relevant. It may be better to stay up late a couple of nights a week before the fair, rather than the night before. Then you and your 4-H'er can at least catch up on some sleep before attending a long day at the fair.

Read and make sure you and the members understand all the rules, regulations, and requirements for the exhibits. Leaders may want to review these at a club meeting where parents are present. It will be especially important that you help new members and their parents understand the "4-Hese." Members who have taken a specific project could help those exhibiting for the first time.

Understand the purpose of exhibiting and judging projects

Project exhibits are brought to a 4-H fair to recognize each 4-H member for his/her accomplishments and to give each member an opportunity to learn more about his/her project, and to gain life skills such as evaluating one's own work and communicating that information effectively with someone else.

Understand 4-H conference judging

Conference judging is the process used for all non-livestock exhibits at State Fair and by most

counties to evaluate 4-Hers' exhibits. During conference judging, the 4-H member talks with the judge and will be asked questions about the exhibit. He needs to be prepared to tell what he was trying to do in his project (goals). He needs to be able to describe the methods and processes used to produce the exhibit. The description may include both successes and mistakes he learned from. He may also want to tell how completing this project may affect his future. 4-H projects are evaluated independently, not compared. Judging is done according to quality standards, not a matter of personal whim. The standards are high, but attainable and appropriate to different age levels. Completed exhibits that meet the show requirements receive Blue (meets standards), Red (needs improvement), or White (needs much improvement) awards.

Review the quality standards for each project. Help 4-H'ers and their parents understand what the judge may be looking for. The melted marshmallows in cereal treats should be mixed thoroughly throughout the cereal, the cereal in the marshmallow treats should not taste stale, and the mixture should be spread smoothly in the pan. The judge will also be looking for evidence that the 4-H member completed the project and that he learned while completing the project. The individual who has made marshmallow treats may have learned that the marshmallows don't stick to the spatula if you grease it before starting. One of the best ways to help a 4-H member understand these standards is to provide an opportunity for the 4-Her to practice evaluating (judging) his own project.

Relax and have a good time. What do you want a 4-H member to remember about his/her experience at the fair? Winning a blue ribbon is an excellent goal to set. But it may not be the only goal a 4-H member sets. And a person may learn just as much or even more by not reaching a particular goal.