

FARM: 4-H youth gain essential elements of positive youth development through animal science

By Shanna Abatti, Special to this Newspaper | Posted: Thursday, October 26, 2017 12:15 am

Imperial County 4-H provides many opportunities for young people to develop character and experience and personal growth, not only through the general 4-H projects, but also through the 4-H livestock program. All youth are welcome to participate in the livestock program regardless of the city in which they live. The deadline is fast approaching. If you would like to exhibit this project at the California Mid-Winter Fair & Fiesta in 2018 you will need to register with 4-H by Nov. 6.

It is simple, just log on to <http://ceimperial.ucanr.edu/4h/enrollment> to find a club near you. The Imperial County 4-H and Junior Livestock Program provide many project areas that address the various segments of the livestock industry. Emphasis for all of the projects is on the development of the young person. The youth are the focus of the projects, while the animals and projects are utilized as the vehicle for the progress in developing the youth. These educational programs cover subject matters from production practices to the meat product supplied for the consumer's plate.

There are a variety of livestock projects Imperial County youth can undertake. From as simple as the family dog to as large as a steer. Small animal projects provided for youth ages 5 to 19 are cavy (guinea pigs), rabbits, poultry, winged wildlife, water fowl, dogs, pygmy goats and turkeys. Large animal projects (youth ages 9-19) include beef (steers), feeder calves, goats (dairy and market boar), sheep, swine, and horses.

Livestock projects are special because young people learn what it truly means to care for, and be responsible for, another living being. Youth learn time management, budgeting, record keeping skills and many animal husbandry skills. They also learn about the livestock industry and its role in the larger agricultural economy. Many youth who exhibit at the local fair use the money they earn towards their future college expenses.

One of the life skills youth developed through 4-H animal science projects is responsibility. Youth are accountable for making sure the animal is fed, watered, sheltered and healthy. It is up to the young person to keep the animals' needs in mind and carry out all the tasks necessary to keep the animal in good care and condition. The animal is dependent upon its owner. If the owner does not get up early in the morning to provide food to the animal, it goes hungry. There is a large sense of selflessness involved in learning and practicing responsibility. 4-H animal science projects are an excellent and safe way to demonstrate to youth what responsibility means. 4-H adult and teen leaders work closely with youth to help them learn and grow. While it may be a young 4-H'ers

responsibility to care for his or her animal, part of learning is to fail. In this safe environment, youth can learn from their mistakes while 4-H leaders will help support the young person and their animal while modeling responsibility. At times responsibility may feel burdensome, but instilling this value in youth will not only make them better 4-Hers; it will also make them better people.

Another of the many life skills youth develop through 4-H animal science projects is work ethic. Anyone who has owned a pet can appreciate this at some level; every animal requires a great deal of responsibility and work. If you are not willing to feed, water, groom or walk a dog, even if it means getting up early in the morning, then you are not ready to own a dog. Owning and caring for an animal that depends on you, is a great deal of responsibility. But work ethic goes beyond putting in time and some elbow grease. Work ethic speaks to the positive values and attributes associated with believing in hard work. It is about building strong moral fiber and character. Youth working under the guidance of parents and 4-H volunteers cannot only understand what hard work is all about, but also appreciate the fruits of their labor; fruits from their animal project and fruits within themselves. Yes, hard work takes getting sweaty, dirty and is tiring, but instilling this value in youth will not only make them better 4-H'ers, but it will also make them better citizens for our community.

In 4-H there are four essential elements to positive youth development: Mastery, Generosity, Belonging and Independence. The 4-H Livestock Program fosters all four elements. Attend a livestock show and you cannot miss the sense of community. Maybe no other 4-H program demonstrates a sense of belonging like the livestock program. Youth build mastery as they practice and compete. Getting up early to feed and care for animals builds a "can do" attitude important for independence. How does one rightly describe generosity? The livestock shows again offer fine examples — adults sharing what they know with youth with no thought to the competitive nature of the event. If you would like more information, to join, volunteer, or donate to Imperial County 4-H please call 442-265-7700 or email Shanna Abatti at smaabtti@ucanr.edu