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From the 4-H Youth Development Advisor, Steven Worker



Exhibitions versus Competition

*to display something
for public inspection*

a contest between rivals

Fair season is here! And while the UC 4-H program is a distinct entity from the fair, 4-H youth are preparing to showcase a variety of “things made, raised, grown, or improved.” Fairs provide a ready venue to exhibit things made or raised and receive feedback from experts. Providing venues for youth to exhibit the product of their work and receive feedback can support youth in assessing their learning and set future goals and direction. Exhibition may help support a growth mindset, a belief that intelligence, abilities and personality can grow with effort and persistence. An emphasis on growth mindset is one reason many 4-H events use a criterion-based system where youth are evaluated against a set standard rather than against one another.

Sometimes, the balance tilts, and youth (and parents) focus on the *competitive* aspects of events. In this, youth are seeking an extrinsic reward – 1st place – and trying to “win at all costs” serves counterproductive purposes: promoting performance goals (over learning goals), reducing self-esteem, and limiting the development of healthy relationships. This can reinforce a fixed mindset, a belief that talents and skills are mainly inherited, static, and can’t change much.

Looking at the literature, over 1,200 research studies have been conducted comparing cooperative, competitive, and individualist work (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In comparison with competitive or individually-oriented tasks, people in cooperative tasks often experience higher intrinsic motivation, use more creative thinking, have more positive attitudes towards the task, promote greater social capital, and increase general psychological health.

As your 4-H youth begin to show at the fair this summer, please remember to help them (and their parents) to focus on learning and growing from their exhibition, with competition as one method to assess one’s skills. Help youth use evaluators/judge’s feedback to help learn, improve, and grow. Praise youth when they show effort, try alternate strategies, or seek help.

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* Johnson, D. & Johnson, R. (2009). An educational psychology success story: Social interdependence theory and cooperative learning. *Educational Researcher*, 38(5), 365-379.