

# 4-H self-concept building in century III

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The 4-H program serves young people of various ages from diverse social-cultural backgrounds. The overall goal of 4-H is stated in *4-H Century III*: "The 4-H mission is to help young people become self-directing, productive, and contributing members of society."<sup>1</sup>

It's our consensus that the goal of all the 4-H objectives depends on the fulfilling of one particular objective—acquiring positive attitudes toward self and a feeling of self-worth.<sup>2</sup> The premise is that the core of one's personality is based on his/her self-esteem, which is "the sum total of personal awareness, evaluations, and expectations (that) come from how one has been dealt with by others, and how one has coped with life."<sup>3</sup>

Self-perception of sex-role, whether consciously and/or unconsciously, is important in self-concept development. An individual's perception of his/her sex-role behavior, as with self-concept, is directly related to the way he/she is being treated by others in the environment. Thus, one's self-perception is the result of subtle social-cultural expectations imposed on him/her in daily social interactions.

## Sex-Role Study

Recently, we conducted a study to investigate attitudes toward sex-roles as seen through the drawings of preadolescent 4-H members. The decision to use drawings for this study was based on the fact that drawings have been used extensively in evaluating various personality dimensions and as indicators of psychosocial development.

A total of 222 preadolescents composed of 87 boys and 135 girls contributed drawings for this study. The boys and girls, ages 9-13, were campers at two 4-H sponsored summer

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camps in Virginia. Fifty-three boys and 71 girls were from Camp I, while 34 boys and 64 girls were from Camp II.

Each child was given a piece of newsprint, 18" X 24" and colored crayons. The participants at Camp I were asked to "draw a picture of a *helping scene*." The children at Camp II were asked to "draw a picture of a *fighting scene*." This was a modified version of the method used by Feinberg.<sup>4</sup>

In assessing masculine and feminine traits, researchers often base their judgment on whether the behavior is aggressive or dependent. Aggressive behavior is usually considered to be masculine; dependent and cooperative behaviors feminine. The analyses and interpretations of the findings in this article are based on these assumptions.

#### *Helping Scene*

The difference in the content of the "helping" drawings depended on the sex of the illustrator. The boys seemed to show a preference for depicting scenes of actively rescuing or giving help (60.4%). Over a third of the girls (38.7%) showed passivity in asking to be helped or waiting to be rescued. A large percentage of girls (30.0%) expressed helping in terms of aiding those who were less fortunate or helpless. Feelings and perceptions of traditional sex-role differences were thus reflected in these drawings.

#### *Fighting Scene*

For the boys, almost 68% of the fighting scenes fell into two categories: wrestling/boxing (38.2%) and war (29.4%). Singularly or in groups, the actor and/or actors were striving to defeat an adversary. The main content of the girls' drawings of fighting can be categorized under arguing and fist fighting (59.4%). Although there's an implication of fist fights, fighting was usually perceived as verbal assaults, disagreements, name calling, and an occasional depiction of girls being beaten up by boys.

The "fighting" drawings of the boys were more active, competitive, and physically aggressive. The girls' drawings were more sedentary, passive, and verbally aggressive. Once again the children's drawings expressed traditional sex-role differences. Fighting for boys usually involved situations that were more structured with rules and order. Fighting for girls was usually depicted as interpersonal conflict between two people.

#### *Study Summary*

The children in this study seemed to accept traditional sex-roles associated with men and women as a function of a particular social-cultural environment. Drawings, as in children's play activities, reflected the trying out and/or playing out of adult sex-roles they were most familiar with. They represented

the children's interpretation, perception, and conception of males and females in different situations. This, in turn, reflected their own identifications, expectations, and status in the society at large.

The socialization process imposes pervasive influences on a child's sense of identity and in the way that he/she develops attitudes and values concerning what is and what isn't appropriate sex-role behavior.

### **Changing Sex-Role Concept**

Presently, when attempts are being made to diminish sex-role stereotyping and offer more equalized opportunities for both males and females, it's disturbing to note the different, and yet almost predictable, traditional ways the boys and girls of this study responded. Each person, regardless of age, should have the opportunity to develop to his/her optimal potential. "When children are channeled into sex-role stereotypes, both boys and girls are deprived of freedom of choice."<sup>5</sup>

Stereotypical treatment of children may prevent them from developing positive feelings toward themselves. Parents, teachers, and adults who work with children can help enhance a child's self-concept through equalization of child-rearing practices, attitudes, and expectations.

*The problem encountered by adults in facing the concept of equalization of sex-role is due to its conflict with traditional attitudes and the lack of a clear definition about what's acceptable. This ambiguity and tentativeness creates a feeling of stress.*

The changing concept of the sex-role exerts social pressures on the population to change. A transitional period filled with problems is the result. People experiencing growing pains may cling to traditions as a defense mechanism. The self-assured person strives for change and reaches for higher levels of functioning. A person who's insecure often fears change. By clinging to the familiar, he/she can't grow and may resort to the use of defense mechanisms to escape from reality.

### **Implications for Extension**

#### *Role Models*

Extension programs have great impact in changing and enriching the lifestyles, attitudes, and values of their clientele. Consequently, Extension staff may serve as role models. They can help enhance the self-concept of 4-Hers by developing desirable nonsexist sex-role attitudes.

Children are highly vulnerable and impressionable human beings. They depend on strong adult leadership and guidance to help them develop into fully functioning adults. They need adult models who are secure, self-accepting, and receptive to others. Parents, teachers, and adult leaders can offer great impact on the self-concept development of 4-Hers.

*Sex-Role Attitudes* To be effective in helping children develop healthy self-concepts, Extension personnel, 4-H leaders, parents, and other concerned adults should clarify and make known their attitudes toward sex-role equalization in "Century III." They should create opportunities to discuss and define what "human" qualities they want developed in all children. They also need to discuss how these qualities can be encouraged in children through informal social interaction and structured activities. *Feelings, attitudes, values, and standards need to be clarified by both Extension personnel and parents.*

If certain qualities, such as independence, assertiveness, cooperativeness, responsibility, and sensitivity are considered desirable human qualities, they're desirable in all people regardless of sex. Adults working with children should always help socialize children toward such qualities. The result of this emphasis and attention can lead to a better and more intact self-concept.

Feelings, attitudes, and concerns are barriers that have to be broken down, reexamined, and redefined before change can take place. With change comes new ideas, values, and norms that can be identified and developed to better meet the needs of current society.

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## **Conclusion**

Children are our most precious resource for the future. The success of one's experiences in a 4-H program, or other social situations, depends on the development of a positive self-concept. Helping children develop and accept a wider range of human qualities is an important goal for leaders and Extension personnel. A male 4-H leader who is self-assured and possesses a wide range of human qualities serves as a good role model for the boys he leads. Through his interaction with them, he can enhance their personal identification, while encouraging the development of a wide range of human qualities. Similarly, a female 4-H leader can do the same for the girls she leads.

However, only by socializing with both male and female 4-H leaders who have positive self-concepts can both sexes benefit and grow positively. The important issue is that one's

role identification and subsequent self-concept formation aren't contingent solely on having the same-sex models, but having both strong male and female ones.

Adults working with children are obligated to offer the best possible opportunities for the development of a child's individual potential. They should be given the freedom to choose experiences regardless of their sex. The various dimensions of their self-concept, including sex-role identification, should be enhanced and reinforced through equal opportunities.

Both males and females can benefit from acquiring socially desirable qualities. Experiencing the strengths and positive attributes of each group may result in implanting the roots of healthy self-concepts for the development of a harmonious society.

### Footnotes

1. Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, *4-H in Century III* (East Lansing, Michigan: 4-H—Youth Programs, no date given).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
3. R. B. McCandless and R. J. Trotter, *Children's Behavior and Development*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977).
4. S. Feinberg, "Conceptual Content and Spatial Characteristics in Boys' and Girls' Drawings of Fighting and Helping," *Studies in Art Education*, XVIII (Spring, 1977), 63-72.
5. S. C. Samuels, *Enhancing Self-Concept in Early Childhood* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1977), p. 230.