

Reduce Pre-Fair Stress

County Extension agents offer tips for avoiding stress while preparing for the fair.

by Nancy Peterson

If the pace picks up at your house as kids scurry to complete 4-H or other projects for upcoming fairs, take a deep breath and relax. This is supposed to be a learning experience — and fun. It *can* be both.

Participating in fairs can be a valuable experience for youth. They have a chance to share what they've learned and an opportunity to feel good about what they've achieved, says Phyllis Howerton, Kansas State University (K-State) Research and Extension agent in Reno County.

Howerton, who has been a county agent for 35 years, urges parents "to keep things in perspective. This is a time for 4-H'ers to be recognized for their project work — each one needs his or her time to shine."

Howerton contributed her voice of experience as part of a K-State Research and Extension news poll asking agents in the state for suggestions to reduce pre-fair stress, which can occur during last-minute preparations for the fair. Here are comments from several veteran county Extension agents:

"Focus on the learning experience, not the competition," says Pamela Muntz, Kiowa County.

Choosing a doable project that is age-appropriate is recommended by Carl Garten,

Saline County. Sy Nyhart, Leavenworth County, suggests encouraging children to explore interests (or build on them) to generate continuing interest in projects.

Let them do the work

Parental interest and support is encouraged, but allowing children to complete their own projects is likely to stimulate the most beneficial learning experiences, the agents say.

"Work with them, not instead of them," says Jodi Besthorn, Sedgwick County.

Starting early also is a plus. In fact, allowing 4-H'ers the time they need to complete projects is likely to reduce stress for children and their parents, says Michael Vogt, Marshall County.

"Talking with judges and others about their projects provides 4-H'ers an opportunity to practice interpersonal communication," Vogt says. "They eventually learn to be less nervous when speaking with others. The experiences help them develop into more self-confident individuals."

Building confidence

Learning to feel comfortable when talking with project judges is a plus that was identified by many agents. Larry Crouse, Butler County, encourages parents to "Let kids speak for themselves. Step back during judging sessions, rather than stand nearby to prompt responses that you wish your 4-H'er would give. Allowing 4-H'ers to succeed or fail on their own merit can make any awards they might receive more meaningful."

Completing a project gives youth a chance to practice decision-making skills. Younger 4-H'ers may not remember all that a judge has to say, but the fact that they have the courage to talk to a judge is a growth step, says Linda Mirt, Sumner County.

Feedback is important — it can help 4-H'ers develop an appreciation for the opinions of

others and what they can learn from them, agents said.

"The judging process also can help 4-H'ers feel good about what they're doing," says Lois Carlson, Neosho County.

Preparation is key

When it comes to projects, however, Carlson notes that waiting until the last minute is rarely a good idea. Neither is choosing a new recipe as a food entry, she says.

"Preparing a recipe for the first time as an entry isn't likely to yield the best results," says Carlson, who has introduced a "flop" class in the 4-H foods division.

"The new class has proved popular," Carlson says, adding that it gives kids an opportunity to learn from their mistakes.

Friendly competition helps 4-H'ers learn to respect others and their projects. It's also a great way to have fun with others who have similar interests, says Jodine Lynn Tate, Washington County.

Brian Creager, Lyon County, cites the value of meeting students who may go to different schools. "I have several close friendships that began at county fairs," he says.

The benefits of competition are not always readily apparent, agents say.

"Fairs are not about the color of the ribbons kids receive. They are about what they've learned in the process," Tate says.

Nancy Schuster, Anderson County, encourages parents to focus on the positive, regardless of ribbon placing.

"If parents can say something like, 'Wow, you did a great job answering the questions from the judge ...,' children are likely to focus on the benefits rather than [on] what may seem like a disappointment," Schuster says.

Learning to put forth your best effort and to be proud of your accomplishments is a learning experience in itself, says Linda Walter, Finney County.

While Walter noted that "a judge's decision is one person's opinion," Jodi Besthorn of Sedgwick County likened exhibiting at the fair to asking for a second opinion.

"A ribbon placing is not a judgment of the 4-H'er as a person; it's simply a project evaluation," Besthorn says.

What counts is the fact that ribbons or awards aren't likely to last as long as the things young people learn, she says.



Editor's Note: Nancy Peterson is a communications specialist with the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service.

Quick tips

- ▶ Read the fair book, and follow the rules.
- ▶ Choose an age-appropriate project of interest.
- ▶ Start early, and work consistently.
- ▶ Know that each project requires a commitment of time, but also offers a skill-building opportunity.
- ▶ Take pride in accomplishments and willingness to learn.
- ▶ Realize that project judging is not the same as judging the person.
- ▶ Respect the opinions of others, and appreciate what you can learn from them.
- ▶ Show respect for others and their abilities.
- ▶ Relax and enjoy the experience of participating.

Source: K-State Research and Extension* News

* K-State Research and Extension is a shortened name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service.