

# HELPING YOUTH **THRIVE**

*HELPING YOUTH THRIVE THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS*



**PLWG**  
PROGRAM LEADERS  
WORKING GROUP



**FACT SHEET  
INTRO**

*4-H Program Leaders Working Group  
Access, Equity and Belonging Committee*

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## **Thriving Through an Equity Lens**

*April 2022*

# Thriving Through an Equity Lens:

## Fact Sheets to Support Positive Youth Development Professionals

4-H has made a bold commitment to youth across the United States: to reflect the population demographics, vulnerable populations, diverse needs, and social conditions of the country (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). 4-H has affirmed that we will help close the opportunity gap for marginalized youth and communities to fully thrive (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 4-H, 2019; National 4-H Council, 2020). Making good on these promises requires that all those working with youth in 4-H critically analyze current programs and deliver those programs through an equity lens. Administrators, professionals, volunteers, and stakeholders have a responsibility to be aware of and confront the disparities that exist within 4-H programs and in society. Doing so is critical because those who aim to develop youth without acknowledgment of and response to a young person's possible societal inequities is perpetuating injustice (Fields et al., 2018). The 4-H Thriving Model (Arnold, 2018) describes the process of positive youth development in 4-H. We should explore the 4-H Thriving Model, our national theoretical framework, with the same level of critical review to ensure it guides our work with equity and social justice at the fore.

Arnold (2018) proposed a theoretical model of positive youth development for the 4-H program—*The 4-H Thriving Model* (see Figure 1). This model “identifies an intermediate process – youth thriving – that mediates the connection between program context and developmental outcomes” (Arnold, 2018, p. 151). In other words, this model brings together the adapted frameworks that describe the *inputs* and *processes* of positive youth development (PYD) and identifies the expected *outcomes* when high quality PYD occurs (Fields, 2020). The 4-H Program Leaders Working Group (PLWG), Access, Equity, and Belonging Committee (AEBC) has joined with the Advancing the 4-H Thriving Model Taskforce to ensure this nationally adopted model is explored and implemented through an equity lens. Fields (2020) offers a starting point for these discussions within the published literature review [Exploring 4-H Thriving through an Equity Lens](#).

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## 4-H PLWG: Access, Equity and Belonging Committee (AEBC)

The AEBC works to connect various national and local equity efforts that support the 4-H system in reaching its bold goal to engage 10 million youth, reflecting the diversity of the communities we serve (USDA, NIFA, 4-H National Headquarters, 2015).

The functions of AEBC are to:

1. highlight national trends for marginalized audiences,
2. identify and share promising practices,
3. articulate the value of equity work within the 4-H mission,
4. contribute to an inclusive organizational culture, and
5. advocate in support of marginalized audiences (Access, Equity and Belonging Committee, 2019).

The committee is composed of the following Champion Groups:

- Incarcerated Youth
- Immigrant and Refugee Youth
- LGBTQ + Youth / Community
- Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Youth Experiencing Homelessness

- Youth in Foster Care
- Youth with Disabilities
- Youth Living in Poverty
- Racial and Ethnic Youth:
  - African American Youth
  - Asian / Pacific Islander Youth
  - LatinX Advisory Committee
  - American Indian/Alaskan Native Youth

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## Terms and Definitions

There are many terms used to talk about diversity, inclusion, and equity. To facilitate shared understanding of language used throughout these fact sheets, we offer the following list of terms and definitions.

- **Culture:** the shared experiences of people, including their languages, values, customs, beliefs and more. It also includes worldviews, ways of knowing, and ways of communicating. Culture is dynamic, fluid, and reciprocal. Elements of culture are passed on from generation to generation, but culture can also change from one generation to the next (American Evaluation Association 2011; Deen, Huskey & Parker, 2015).
- **Culturally relevant pedagogy:** “A pedagogy [teaching methodology] that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17-18).
- **Diversity:** differences among people with respect to age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, spiritual practices, and other human differences (Deen, Huskey & Parker, 2015).
- **Efficacy/Agency:** a person’s belief in their own value and ability to make a difference in their community, which can lead to action (Fields & Nathaniel, 2015; Niblett, 2017).
- **Equity:** policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that are representative of all members of society, such that each member has access to resources that eliminate differential outcomes by group and individual identity (Niblett, 2017).
- **Inclusion:** a state of being valued, respected and supported. Inclusion authentically puts the concept and practice of diversity into action by creating an equitable environment where the richness of ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives are harnessed (Hudson, 2011; Baltimore Racial Justice, 2016).
- **Injustice:** unequal treatment wherein the rights of a person or a group of people are ignored or restricted (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).
- **Intersectionality:** the notion that identities such as gender identity, race, class, and others cannot be examined in isolation from one another; they interact and intersect in individual’s lives, in society, in social systems, and are mutually constitutive (Crenshaw, 1989; Fields, 2019).
- **Marginalization:** the act of relegating a person or group of people to a position of marginal power within a society (Merriam-Webster, 2018).
- **Oppression:** a set of policies, practices, norms, traditions, definitions and barriers which “function to exploit one social group to the benefit of another social group” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 39).
- **Privilege:** The “rights, advantages, and protections enjoyed by some at the expense of and beyond the rights, advantages, and protections available to others” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 39).
- **Social capital:** The network of relationships and resources that empowers communities to solve problems and thrive. Social capital is developed through trust, engagement and networks, often leading to increased agency (Calvert, Emery & Kinsey, 2013).
- **Social justice:** a vision of a society wherein the distribution of resources, opportunity, societal benefits and protection is equitable for all members. “Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole” (Baltimore Racial Justice 2016, para.11).

- **Social justice education:** A “perspective on education held in partnership between teachers and learners” whereby the principles of social justice [i.e. equity, challenging oppression, building community & fostering agency] are honored (Niblett, 2017, p. 9).
- **Social justice youth development:** A way to foster critical consciousness among young people while encouraging them to act toward achieving a sociopolitical vision (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

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## Our Role and Responsibility to Youth’s Thriving

Positive Youth Development professionals have a responsibility to acknowledge policies, systems, and environments within their organizations and communities that oppress marginalized and non-dominant groups. Understanding the past and current histories of marginalized people from the perspective of these populations is a first step. This knowledge will facilitate professionals’ ability to recognize the impact of the intersection of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and more, and how these apply to a given individual or group and the interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage that marginalize populations face.

PYD frameworks and theoretical models must be viewed through an equity and social justice lens. Doing so is critical and must be followed by the intentional use of PYD frameworks that support marginalized communities including, but not limited to, [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) (ACE’s), ethnic/cultural identity development, positive identity development, [social justice youth development](#), [social ecological models](#) (Fields, 2020; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

In addition, it is equally important for 4-H professionals to learn of the cultural and social capital diverse youth and adults have in communities (Fields, et al., 2018; Yosso, 2016), as well as the negative impacts of oppression and dominance on youth and their communities. This knowledge is often the first step in developing a cultural awareness of the diverse communities we aim to engage. Having cultural awareness includes having an understanding of both the strengths and values of a culture, as well as the historical inequities within cultures. Individuals must hold themselves accountable to ensuring they do this work. As such, 4-H professionals must commit to ongoing learning and professional development to ensure they are providing culturally relevant experiences that value the whole young person.

4-H professionals have a responsibility to inform and adapt their positive youth development approaches to support youth thriving. Rose and Paisley (2006) share “... educators should learn to value various social differences within their participant groups” (p. 142). This is critical in that:

... the dominance of White privilege is well-established in experiential education, and simply encouraging more racially diverse participant groups amounts to a benevolent invitation for ‘others’ to take part in processes and institutions already well under way without them (Rose & Paisley, 2006, p. 142).

In other words, it is not enough to simply invite diverse identities into a well-established 4-H culture. PYD professionals must be open, humble, and nimble enough to create new 4-H cultures and customs with the direct engagement of communities who have historically been left on the margins of their programs and within society. PYD models that are not culturally relevant maintain societal forces of privilege and dominance (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Perry, et al., 2003). Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) expound on this idea by stating:

... current formulations of positive youth development are based on unrealistic, white middle-class conceptions of youth. This view of youth homogenizes their experiences, simplifies their identities, and conceptualizes them through one dominant cultural frame. Consequently, the relevance of culture, race, class, gender, and sexual identity in the positive youth development model are never fully developed. (p. 85)

4-H needs to explore how the various delivery modes (i.e., afterschool, camping, community clubs, school enrichment, etc.) can be culturally relevant, nurture youth sparks, and encourage high duration, intensity and breadth for all youth.

## Introducing the Thriving Model through an Equity Lens Fact Sheets

4-H professionals have an opportunity to rethink how we frame and define the core values and approaches to PYD used within the 4-H Youth Development Program. The 4-H Thriving Model (see Figure 1) presents an opportunity to focus on the key ingredients and outcomes of PYD (Developmental Relationships, Thriving Trajectory, Youth Engagement, Developmental Outcomes and Long-Term Outcomes) rather than the delivery approaches within 4-H (i.e. after-school programs, camps, club, etc.). However, it remains essential to explore and understand the 4-H Thriving Model through an equity lens. It is not sufficient or acceptable to merely say a program is open to all without doing the work and making bold changes to ensure the program is relevant, inclusive and equitable. 4-H professionals should engage in conversations about where the program is at, what is going well, where we are making mistakes, the barriers or anticipated barriers for participation, and what needs to change to truly engage and welcome diverse youth and families. These conversations need to occur to critically assess programs and work towards engaging diverse communities in ways that are meaningful to them. If 4-H truly believes all youth should have the opportunity to thrive, then the program must be grounded in social justice and barriers must be actively removed in order to foster diverse youth and adult engagement.

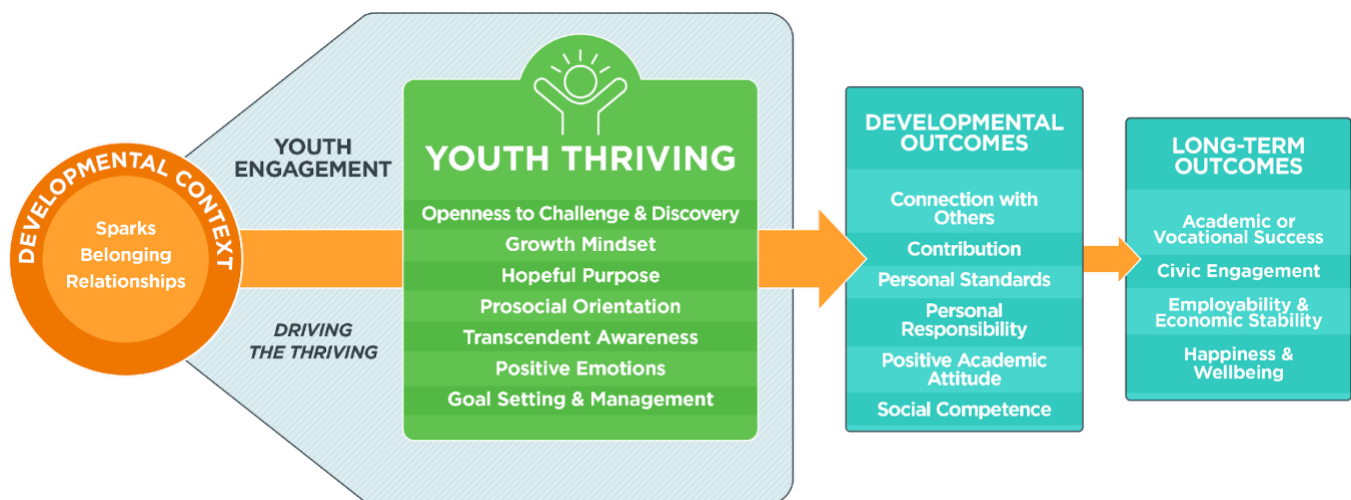


Figure 1. The 4-H Thriving Model

Each AEBC Champion Group has written a fact sheet to explore the Thriving Model through an equity lens for their particular youth population. The fact sheets are designed to bridge research and practice to support 4-H Professionals to use an equity lens that supports youth thriving. However, a singular fact sheet does not fully expose the reader to the multiplier effects of youth’s intersectional identities. Intersectionality describes the notion that identities such as gender identity, race, class, and others cannot be examined in isolation from one another; they interact and intersect in individual’s lives, in society, in social systems, and are mutually constitutive (Crenshaw, 1989; Fields, 2019). Someone who has multiple marginalized identities faces compounded forms of discrimination and oppression. 4-H professionals must increase their understanding of intersectionality in order to actively dismantle oppressive factors within PYD conceptual theories and programs.

Each fact sheet is organized by the following sections:

- **Social Conditions of Youth:** includes the assets that the specific youth group possesses along with the systemic challenges they may face.
- **Competencies Needed to Engage with Youth Population:** highlights related cultural competencies that are necessary for 4-H professionals to equitably engage the youth group, particularly those found within the Access, Equity and Opportunity category of the 4-H Professional, Knowledge, Research and Competencies (PKRC) (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). Recognizing intersectionality and various forms of oppression and discrimination is a core competency skill for working with marginalized communities. It is critical to understand intersectionality and how the liberation of one group is tied to the liberation of another group.
- **Belonging and Participation in 4-H:** describes considerations to support genuine belonging and engaged participation among the specific youth audience. The work of creating inclusive spaces for youth must be active and intentional to combat pervasive oppressive systems. This includes undoing damaging social constructs that lead to creating negative environments and negative outcomes.
- **Community Relationships and Partners:** includes potential regional, statewide and national partners that offer resources or connections to assist youth development professionals in engaging the specific youth audience.
- **Evaluation:** describes the gaps in our current approaches and methods to gather data and include equity considerations that relate to the specific youth audience. It is important to acknowledge that there is an absence of marginalized voices in research and evaluation. It is critically important to amplify and value the voices and experiences that have historically been excluded or devalued.

It is the hope of the AEBC that the subsequent fact sheets help guide the work of 4-H PYD professionals as we move forward in our efforts to engage youth inclusively and equitably across the country. These fact sheets include practical resources and considerations that can inform how we co-design, co-deliver and co-evaluate our programs in partnership with the communities in which we hope to better engage. 4-H professionals must be committed to self-reflection, on-going learning, and the critical review of our organizational practices. 4-H must make good on our promise to America's youth in closing the opportunity gap and supporting the thriving of all youth.

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