

## ***Evaluation Report***

# **Public Speaking Benefits: District Activity Day**

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## **EVALUATION SUMMARY**

Over 100 youth, ages 9-18, participating in Presentation Contest and 4-H Entertains events at the 2007 Northwest District "District Activity Day" reported increases in confidence and skill gains in goal setting, research, content learning, organization, communication, and working with others related to the project. A smaller group interviewed in depth indicated that they went on to apply these skills in a variety of home, school, and community settings.

### **What we know about Public Speaking**

Learning communication skills helps young people navigate their world and prepare for workforce, civic, and family roles they will assume as young adults. Early 4-H leaders, who valued the classical tradition of oratory and practical benefits of public demonstrations, initiated public speaking as a core learning experience for youth. In that tradition, contemporary 4-H youth, ages 9-18, prepare and deliver a 5-12 minute demonstration, illustrated talk, or creative performance for an audience and panel of three expert judges. Youth also may participate in a non-competitive talent event, "4-H Entertains." Research with 4-H alumni confirmed its value in building confidence and life skills. Youth professionals commend the value of public speaking experiences for building skills in research, goal-setting, organization, and oral presentation as well as improving subject matter knowledge. This study confirms traditional beliefs about the benefits of 4-H public speaking, offers insights on the impact of such experiences, and provides a first step for investigating how a variety of 4-H programs benefit youth. ***For years, adults seen how 4-H public speaking builds communication skills and confidence. Then someone said, "Let's ask the kids what it does for them."***

### **How the study was done**

Ninety-eight youth participants in the 2007 North Carolina 4-H Northwest District Activity Day (DAD) completed a one-page survey on the experience and benefits of a public speaking contest. Thirty-seven were selected for a more in-depth interview. Twenty youth in a non-competitive creative performance event also completed the survey. Presentation contest is a voluntary event, and youth qualify for district competition by placing first or second in a similar county event. Youth completed surveys and interviews after presentations to reduce contest-day stress.

Approximately one-half of participants were in the 11-13 year age group, while a quarter each were in the 9-10 and 14-18 age groups. Gender balance was 63% female and 36% male. About half the youth presented for the first time, but nearly one-third had competed three years or more. “4-H Entertains” participants tended to be a little older on average. Nearly all mentioned personal interest as a reason for participation, but only half were urged by others.

### **What youth said about 4-H public speaking experiences**



District Activity Day participants reported that public speaking and entertaining helped most in confidence-building and learning more about a topic. Communication, organization, and goal setting skills were also cited as benefits by many youth. Working with others and research skills were lowest rated benefits, but still highly valued by over 50% of event participants. For details, see Table 1 in the Appendix.

Youth views on the benefits of public speaking experiences were similar across groups:

- Boys and girls did not differ significantly in reporting public speaking benefits
- Younger and older participants reported the same kinds of benefits
- First year participants and multi-year participants reported similar benefits; however, new participants valued confidence and organizational skills slightly more; experienced youth rated research and subject-matter learning slightly higher
- All youth, whether rated above or below the average by event judges, were enthusiastic about benefits of public speaking

Youth views about self-confidence were more closely related to views of communication, goal setting, and organizational skills rather than to views of gains in subject-matter learning. By contrast, youth who reported the greatest benefits from subject matter learning were likely to value research skills rather than communication or goal setting. 4-H Entertains participants were most likely to report higher confidence, goal setting, and working with others, less likely to value research skills.

### **How youth applied their experience**

A sample of youth from each age group was interviewed to explore how they used their experience. Over 80% of youth applied their public speaking knowledge and life skills in everyday settings, while nearly 90% reported greater self-confidence in a variety of activities. Public speaking experiences motivated youth to learn more about specific subject areas (cats, fly fishing, nutrition), to help others (soup kitchen, children with disabilities), to mentor and teach workshops (on subject matter and life skills), to succeed in school (presentations, projects, and academics), and to set goals for the future (major in music, pursue a career in nursing).



### Youth views of program quality

The vast majority of youth made their own choice to participate, but were also encouraged by others, especially peers. Almost all youth were satisfied with the amount of help received in preparing and practicing, and more than 75% felt rules were clear, judges fair, and the climate positive.

### Lessons Learned and Recommendations

This research with 4-H Presentation Contest participants provides many lessons for parents and volunteer leaders working with youth, ages 9-19.

- Youth of all ages benefit from public speaking and performing experiences, gaining both in confidence and in a vast range of life skills;
- First-year participants recognize the benefits of presentation and those benefits continue with additional years of participation;
- Recognition and monetary rewards were not the most important reasons for participation and performance scores were not related to perceived benefits;
- Most youth are self-motivated to prepare but appreciate invitation and assistance from peers and adults;
- Presentation experiences increase knowledge and motivation to continue to learn and serve in diverse ways.

Perhaps the more interesting findings involve things that youth did not say during their interviews:

- Youth who were interviewed were not focused on winning medals or building a resume;
- With almost 40 categories for presentation, youth did not complain that they did not have opportunity to speak to their area of interest;
- Youth willingly completed evaluation surveys and enjoyed their interviews as opportunities to share their experience rather than as testing requirements.

The research also offers challenges for programming with youth, including:

- Engaging more youth to participate, providing additional venues for those interested and graduated opportunities for those not ready to deliver a 5-12 minute speech;
- Developing clear and consistent protocols for teaching and judging public speaking across a wide variety of venues, styles, topics, and personalities;
- Understanding the amount and types of assistance that is “about right” for each youth, as well as how to help youth become self-governed learners, able to challenge themselves and seek resources they need to grow;

Since this study is one of the first to explore the impact of 4-H public speaking, many questions remain to be answered regarding the quality and impact of such activities, including the following:

- Recruitment: How are youth engaged in a variety of opportunities that cultivate skills and motivate participation in speaking events? What venues expand participation to broader audiences?

- Rehearsal: How are youth trained and coached before participating in a public speaking event? How can programs progressively build skills and offer new challenges to youth as they mature in research and speaking?
- Recitation: What conditions enhance delivery of presentations?
- Reflection: How can judges or coaches help youth affirm and learn from experiences (however dismal)? What factors should be included in judging rubrics? What are best practices for training and supervising judges?

## References

Silliman, B. (in press). Youth views of experiences and benefits of public speaking. *Journal of Youth Development*.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Level of Benefits as Viewed by Youth

	(Number responding from 98 total youth*)					Mean
	Little.....	Some.....	A Lot			
Self-confidence	0	7	11	21	57	4.33/5.00
Learning about my topic	3	7	12	27	49	4.14
Communicating ideas to others	4	0	17	34	37	4.09
Organizing ideas	4	24	30	34	34	4.02
Setting and reaching goals	5	8	10	33	39	3.98
Working with others	6	12	20	27	32	3.69
Doing research	10	9	21	31	25	3.54

- Cumulative totals less than 98 reflect missing data

Note 1: Significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between Confidence and all but Learning from Topic; between Learning from Topic and Working with Others, Research ( $p < .02$ ); Non-significant differences marked with vertical bar.

Scale reliability: alpha = .77