

Meat the Future

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“The Benefits of Youth Livestock Exhibition”

As the days heat up and our sweat glands get a good workout, it reminds us that summer is in full swing! With these long, hot, summer days come county fairs scattered all across the country and youth exhibits being fine-tuned for their big debut.

County fair youth exhibits can range from decorated cakes and cookies to harvested garden displays, from rocketry displays to woodworking, from rabbits to poultry and from pigs to goats. The limits are few and far between when it comes to exhibit options for today’s 4-H and FFA youth who participate in local county fairs!

As someone who grew up raising and showing pigs and cattle, for the sake of this article I would like to focus on the ‘sight unseen’ of showing livestock and the qualities that lie behind the show ring.

Let’s start at the beginning in case you are asking yourself “Why would someone want to chase kids and livestock around a hot fairground?”

Youth who choose to participate in livestock project areas are tasked with the responsibility of purchasing or raising an animal (or multiple), raising and caring for the project, and training the animal to be “show ready”. As their show date or county fair approaches, they will exhibit their animal in the ring to a judge who will rank animals within a specie against each other based on physical conformation traits such as muscle, fat cover, body structure and many others. You may also witness “showmanship” classes which ranks showman within each specie against youth in the same age category based on their ability to show that animal in the best way possible.

Based on the paragraph about, it should become obvious that there are a number of life skills built into livestock projects. I could use this column space to list out skills such as work ethic, responsibility, time management and many more... or I could expand on the obvious and take that a step further to show you exactly how valuable livestock projects can be to youth who participate in them.

The following information are results from a study conducted at Texas Tech University that focused on validating the perceived benefits of youth livestock exhibition. Their study utilized a review of historical documents, in depth interviewing, and observations to analyze real life situations. Take a look at their results, in order of strongest appearance!

1. **Social Relationships:** Study participants emphasized the importance of developing friends as well as social contacts. These relationships created through livestock exhibition satisfy our humanly need for companionship with those with similar interests, but also aid in the satisfaction of career goals.
2. **Character:** The subcategories associated with this theme are as follows: responsibility, confidence, sportsmanship, and how to deal with loss. Participants felt that character developed through exhibiting livestock promoted growth from a child to a successful adult.

3. Family Togetherness and Family Values: It was apparent that participants in this study put emphasis on the importance of the family participating in activities together.
4. Exposure to Competition: The fourth theme in the study dealt with the competition that competitive livestock showing introduces to exhibitors. Two meanings developed from the theme of competition that stems from the phenomenon of participation in competitive events. One category resulted from the need to satisfy the desire of participation in competitive events. The other related to the exposure of winning and losing.
5. Knowledge and Care of Animals: The last theme that emerged from the study was the knowledge and care of animals that exhibitors gain from showing livestock. Participants felt this knowledge was important, especially if it relates to a future career.

As you can see, youth who participate in livestock project areas learn far more than how to carry a feed bucket! They are learning life skill that will shape their education and prepare them for success in the adult career force.

If you have any questions for these youth, I'm certain that many of them would be happen to answer – so, don't hesitate to approach them at your local county fair to learn more about their projects or their future plans!

Some information in this article has been adapted from an article written by University of Nebraska Extension Educator, Steve Niemeyer.

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