

EXTENSION *Today*

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

CHARACTER COUNTS

By Randy Weckman

Life is full of pitfalls, obstacles, and dilemmas. Sometimes it's easy to lose your moral compass, especially if you are young.

The Extension 4-H program Character CountsSM recognizes those issues and helps kids throughout Kentucky keep their bearings on the winding roads of childhood and adolescence.

Character Counts, developed by the Josephson Institute, doesn't preach at kids. Instead, it allows them to understand that their actions and reactions to things do make a difference in their lives, their families, and their communities.

Built on six core values – trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship – the program encourages young people to think about pursuing their own ethical behaviors.

Since its start in mid the 1990s, the program has grown so much that now it reaches nearly 22,000 young Kentuckians each year. The program is flexible, which means it can be adapted to local situations, according to Anna Lucas. Lucas is a former Extension 4-H/youth development program specialist who initiated the program in Kentucky and continues in her retirement to coordinate the program.

A Few Examples

In **Hopkins County**, for example, the Character Counts program has gone to school. Hundreds of school children have learned about personal ethics through the program.

According to Hopkins County 4-H leader and teacher Cyndi Boggs, the



Clark County High School 4-H teens use puppets and cartoon pages to teach Character Counts concepts to kindergarteners.

young people learn criteria for making appropriate decisions.

"The first week of school I had six or eight write-ups for disciplinary problems. Now there are weeks I don't have any. This makes for a safer school," Boggs said.

In **Pulaski County**, Character Counts reached nearly 450 4-H members. And not only did the young people learn about ethics, they enjoyed the program, with 90 percent saying they liked the program.

One Pulaski youngster said, "I learned that character isn't who you are, it's what you do."

Judy Russell, a 4-H leader in **Edmonson County**, is enthusiastic about Character Counts. (She and 40 other volunteers help Christy Ramey, Extension family and consumer sciences agent,

provide the program to more than 1,100 Edmonson County young people each year.)

Having been a volunteer leader with the program since it started in Edmonson County three years ago, Russell believes that Character Counts makes a real difference in the kids' lives and in the community.

"I love it. The first graders I work with try so hard to absorb all the points we make and the reasons why their character counts. By the end of the year, I see them putting the pieces of the program together in their own behavior," she said.

Lucas said the value of the program is that it "helps young people develop workforce and teamwork skills as well as responsibility."

From Across the Commonwealth

Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service programs are locally defined and locally administered. Here are a few examples of county Extension programs that are making a real difference in people's lives.

More Bucks for Bushels

McCracken County Cooperative Extension Service's aggressive educational program to help farmers market their grain more profitably yielded an increase of 50 cents a bushel for corn and 75 cents to a \$1.25 per bushel for soybeans for farmers following marketing principles. That amounts to about \$35 to \$40 an acre improvement in revenues for corn farmers and about a \$15 per acre improvement for soybean farmers.

Improving Teen Driving

Teenage drivers represent fewer than six percent of licensed drivers, but account for nearly a quarter of all injury car crashes. To address this issue, the **Henry County Cooperative Extension Service** organized a "crash course in auto safety." All sophomores in the county were invited to attend the course. They learned safe driving techniques, insurance issues, and basic car maintenance skills. More than 96 percent of the 160 young people attending reported that the program helped make them better drivers.

Farm and Home Safety Field Day

Safety around the home and on the farm is important, but too often it is taken for granted. To focus attention on safety issues, the **Jackson County Cooperative Extension Service** sponsored a Farm and Home Safety Field Day, which included programs on food safety, tractor safety, and farm safety as well as a skin cancer screening. Grants from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture and from the local community provided safety equipment to those who attended. The result of the program should be enhanced safety in the home and on the farm.



Fighting Osteoporosis

Half of all women over 60 have osteoporosis, a thinning of bones that can lead to fractures and death. The **Union County Cooperative Extension Service** conducted educational programs that will help reduce the incidence and severity of osteoporosis among this population. Sixty Homemakers learned the importance of nutrition in preventing osteoporosis as well as other techniques to prevent it. When surveyed seven months after the program, the results were impressive: participants increased their calcium intake; 30 percent had secured a bone mineral density test; and 20 percent had started taking medication to prevent osteoporosis.

Budding Entrepreneurs

In today's economy, youth need to understand the fundamentals of business before they leave high school. The **Garrard County Cooperative Extension Service** conducted a week-long

"Mini Society" that focused on the business of business. The 4-H'ers participating in the program started their own business, rented space, decided on currency, designed a flag, purchased licenses and permits, and learned to set retail prices. And they took out loans to simulate a real business environment. Throughout the mock program, the 4-H'ers learned strategies such as developing contracts and selling failing business ventures. One participant summed up the experiences, "I didn't know a business takes so much work and planning!"

Creating a World Linkage

The **Monroe County Cooperative Extension Service's** team of agents worked with local leaders to fund and develop an Economic Development Center. A \$100,000 grant has been used to develop the CenterNet project, which houses a world-wide video conferencing center for the county. As a result, the county now has the opportunity to offer college courses and continuing education programs via teleconferencing.

Reducing Costs, Improving Returns

Sixteen Todd County farmers improved their incomes by reducing costs or improving returns on their grain crops last year by nearly a quarter of a million dollars, thanks to an Extension program offered by the **Todd County Cooperative Extension Service**.

In the program, farmers learned to use a computer program to calculate target prices for their grain marketing plans. With that aid, the farmers calculated the grain prices that they needed to ensure a profit at three different yield levels. Based on the outcome of those scenarios, they could make better decisions. One farmer increased his income by \$100,000 by

using the principles. Others reported savings from \$1,000 to \$80,000 by reducing input costs.

Public Speaking Made Easy

For many, the fear of public speaking is one of the greatest challenges of adulthood. But in Washington County, young people are avoiding the fear by participating in the 4-H Talk Meet, sponsored by the **Washington County Cooperative Extension Service**. Last year, 690 elementary and junior high students learned to select their topic, research it, and deliver it to their peers without fear. Students reported being at ease by knowing how to present a speech.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Recognizing that there's been a 40 percent increase in the number of grandparents having responsibility for raising grandchildren during the last decade, the **Kenton County Cooperative Extension Service**, in collaboration with several other Northern Kentucky counties, sponsored a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Conference with 200 "grands" in attendance. Topics touched on the financial, legal, and emotional aspects of raising grandchildren. As a result of the conference, three new Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support groups were formed.

Finding Alternatives To Tobacco

With income from tobacco production declining precipitously in the area, the **Montgomery and Bath County Cooperative Extension Services** jointly formed a committee of eight leaders to plan a four-night intensive program to educate farmers and families about 22 alternative enterprises. More than 150 farm families attended the programs. Ninety percent of those attending said that the programs was helpful in making plans for alternative income sources.



Expanding Horizons (and Wallets) Through Babysitting

Teens need cash and parents need quality babysitting. Recognizing this mutual need, the **Wayne County Cooperative Extension Service** worked with the Wayne County School System to sponsor Expanding Horizons, a summer program to teach teens babysitting skills. The two-week long babysitting school taught childcare and safety skills. The 18 young people enrolled in the program were able to provide much needed, safe, and secure babysitting for parents. And they earned spending money, too.

Improving Health

Bourbon County's incidence of cancer is high, at 327 per 100,000 individuals. The **Bourbon County Cooperative Extension Service** is the lead agency involved in a 24-member county-wide cancer coalition to help reduce the incidence of cancer-related deaths through early screening. A top initiative is breast and cervical cancer screening among under-insured and uninsured women. With a grant to increase cancer screening within this group, coupled with an aggressive campaign, the county increased the number of mammograms for women over 40 by 49 percent.

Improving Community Life Through Leadership

With many county residents without a safe, reliable water supply and with only about half of the roads paved and with no urgent care services for the county, the Carter County Fiscal Court magistrates asked the **Carter County Cooperative Extension Service** to organize a public forum to address the issues facing the county. A county-wide meeting was held to involve the public in addressing these vital issues. As a result of the meeting, a long-range county road plan has been created; three hospitals in adjoining counties have worked together to address the medical issues facing the county; and five water districts have held a long-range planning meeting.

Helping Poor People Manage Food Resources

Hunger and food insecurity are problems for many poor families. In Breathitt County, 70 percent of school children are eligible for reduced-price school meals and 3,000 people receive food stamps. The **Breathitt County Cooperative Extension Service** conducted eight training sessions for people who use community food reserves, to help them stretch their food budgets and become less dependent on emergency food stores. Participants gained experience in meal planning and preparation using low-cost items as well as ways to manage food stamps, cash, or donated foods. Informal follow-up with participants indicated that they had used at least some of the food management and preparation skills to improve their food status.

Critical Issues Identified

The Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service takes pride in its ability to develop educational programs that are responsive to the needs of citizens. Through the Extension Council Advisory System, 12,868 local residents have worked with Extension Agents to ensure that individual and community needs are identified. Plans are then developed to design educational programs to address those issues. Over time, people's needs change and Extension programs adjust accordingly.

This past year County Extension Councils identified the critical program thrusts of importance to their counties. That information from the 120 counties then was combined into priorities for each of the 14 multi-county areas. And the area lists were, in turn, summarized for the state as a whole. The following are the results of that grassroots process:

Health and Nutrition – the relationship between human nutrition and one's health, such as wellness programs, disease prevention and screening, and special dietary needs.

Environment and Natural Resources – water quality and quantity, animal waste disposal, the development of farm plans, and community recycling and solid waste systems.

Agricultural Marketing and Profitability – with the drop in farm income, attention is on improved management skills, reducing the cost of inputs, improving the price for products sold, and joining with other producers to gain an advantage.

Family and Parenting Education – family development, parenting skills, and child development.

Alternative Agricultural Enterprises – producers are scrambling to find new enterprises to replace lost income from tobacco; that requires feasibility studies, marketing arrangements, and value-added activities.

Rural and Economic Development – a broad-ranging category, from small and home business development, tourism, and human capital development to issues resulting from the rural-urban interface.

Youth Development – workforce preparation, character education, youth protection, and community service projects.

Leadership Development – programs in leader skill development and their utilization in the community setting.

Safety – Safety issues are seen as important on the farm (pesticides, equipment, and large animals) and in the home (fire, firearms, ATV, water, sun).

Family Financial Management – the planning, budgeting and spending of the family income.

Although most of these topics are not new to Extension, now the specific emphases of many are somewhat different. The success of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service depends on how well we listen to Kentuckians as they express their needs and then how we go about developing educational programs in response.



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Extension Today is published twice a year and highlights program accomplishments of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. For more information, contact us:

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