

4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. Leaders: *Know Before You Go!*



When you do something repeatedly, it is easy to slip into complacency and assume that things will stay the way they have always been. This type of attitude can lead to a lack of integrity and, consequently, an unsafe environment. This is unacceptable in the 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. (Safe Archery and Firearms Education and Training for Youth) program. 4-H parents and volunteers have the very weighty responsibility of educating young people in a nonformal classroom setting. Outside the framework of a typical student/teacher relationship, the mentor arises. Who is a mentor in the 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. program? It's you!

This is a very important job. We are responsible for making sure every child—whether 8 or 18—feels validated and has the very best experience possible. How can you do this? By making sure you know the latest rules and regulations before you get started. This is essential to the 4-H learning process.

Each year a new set of documents is released to the public. These documents are vital to the success of your program. These documents are the *4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. Event Handbook* (Extension Publication 2752) and the *4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. State Invitational Rulebook* (Extension Publication 2751). Following is a brief explanation of the two documents:

Event Handbook: The 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. Event Handbook covers all things 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y.—general rules as well as discipline-specific details and rules. This manual includes everything from permissible clothing and footwear to competitive levels to the purpose of the program. The secondary nature of this document is to serve as the rulebook for all competitions at county, multi-county, and district events.

State Invitational Rulebook: The 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. State Invitational Rulebook is the appendix to the Event Handbook, as it serves as the rules for this senior-only invitational event. Participants who qualify to compete at the state invitational will use this rulebook to learn courses of fire, targets, and other information they will need at this event.

*Note: These two documents list 4-H rules. You will also find references to the National Governing Body (NGB) for each discipline. For rules not listed in the 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. documents, you should consult the NGB.



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Clearly, having a framework of rules by which to standardize the events is very important. But these documents also serve other purposes:

1. to make sure the environment is safe for children,
2. to keep the presentation of the matches consistent, and
3. to make sure appropriate nationally recognized standards are followed.

These rules and guidelines provide you with the tools you need to work with young people. They serve as your teaching plan. The material is there; teach it, actively participate, and watch children learn the rewarding lessons available through the 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. program.

Safety is more than keeping the barrel of a gun pointed in an appropriate direction. When it comes to educating young people, the total environment must feel safe. You, as the mentor, must not judge participants based on performance or history. You must accept them as they are without pretense or preconceived notion of ability.

No one likes to feel that they have been short-changed or cheated. Not knowing the rules or changing them based on your personal preference leads to an unsatisfactory learning experience. Time and time again, the results are devastating. Think of how a child feels after practicing for months at 10 yards, only to discover at competition that he/she is expected to shoot at 100 yards.

4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. instructors are responsible for adequately preparing children for competition. Let's look at a few "don'ts" and "dos" that can ensure 4-H'ers are prepared for the experience of a lifetime.

The Don'ts

Whether you are a first-time instructor or veteran, **don't** gloss over your discipline. Changes may or may not have occurred from the previous year. Assuming that you know your discipline forward and backward can lead to serious mistakes. You owe it to your 4-H'ers to make sure they are as prepared as they can be **before** practices and competitions begin.

Don't shrug off something as probably a typo or error. If you don't know the answer, contact your agent with a detailed question. The agent will contact the 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. program coordinator for clarification. This applies to even the smallest details. It would be incredibly disappointing to show up for a competition only to be told you can't participate because you did not know the rules. It is your responsibility and duty to know and follow the rules.

Don't take hearsay as fact. These "facts" can and do lead to more confusion than clarity.

Don't make a purchase without checking to see if the equipment is actually allowed! Some vendors and businesses are not familiar with the 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. program and can give misinformation. There are other youth shooting programs that have different requirements, and differentiating between them is critical.

Don't be ashamed to ask a question. You may not feel comfortable asking in person, but, with today's technology, an answer is only a click away! Send an email to your Extension agent or instructor. They will know how to find answers and will be more than willing to help.

The Dos

Do read the 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. Event Handbook and State Invitational Rulebook completely. The handbook is exactly what the title indicates: it is more than just rules; it's an explanation of how the process works from the county forward. You may find answers to questions you haven't even thought of yet. Or you may be inspired to get your 4-H'ers involved in other activities.

Do ask questions. The worst question ever asked is the one that is not asked at all! Educate yourself on the program.

Do get involved! Become a registered volunteer, and help out. You don't have to be a "crack shot" or know how to dismantle a rifle in the dark to help in your club. Clubs are always looking for people to help. Tasks always need to be done, and even the smallest contribution can improve a club.

Do remember that we all have the same goal, and that is the success of young people. We want them to have fond memories of their time in the program. We do not want their memories to be of leaders arguing with range officials. These are small moments in time when we should work to be a positive influence on young people.

Do outfit your 4-H'ers with the appropriate equipment, to the best of your ability. Make sure participants have legal equipment and that it fits them. A gun with a too-long stock or a bow that is over poundage can be very discouraging.

Do be resourceful and look for ways to make your club better. Search for funding partners. Ask others about equipment they may not be using. You might be surprised at things parents and coaches have accumulated and are willing to share during the course of the year.



Reading the instructions can be burdensome and sometimes downright boring, but it is essential when working with young people and for the future of the 4-H S.A.F.E.T.Y. Program. So read up, fill up your mental gas tank, and "know before you go"!

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