

Cavy Resource Handbook:

A 4-H Guide to Guinea Pigs



Name _____

Age (as of January 1 of the current year) _____

County _____

Club Name _____

Advisor _____



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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| The 4-H Cavy Project..... | 2 |
| Chapter 1: Animal Care and Well-Being..... | 9 |
| Chapter 2: History..... | 13 |
| Chapter 3: Anatomy..... | 15 |
| Chapter 4: Selection..... | 20 |
| Chapter 5: Housing and Equipment..... | 33 |
| Chapter 6: Records..... | 37 |
| Chapter 7: Nutrition..... | 43 |
| Chapter 8: Health..... | 47 |
| Chapter 9: Reproduction..... | 54 |
| Chapter 10: Grooming and Showing..... | 60 |
| Chapter 11: Marketing..... | 71 |
| Chapter 12: Careers..... | 73 |
| Glossary..... | 75 |
| Resources..... | 80 |
| References..... | 80 |

Is my pet a cavy or a guinea pig?

Most people refer to cavies as guinea pigs, even though they are not really pigs and are not from Guinea. They are in the genus *Cavia* though, and the name cavy is considered by breeders to be more accurate and descriptive. This book usually uses cavy, but cavy and guinea pig can be used interchangeably.

The 4-H Cavy Project

Overview

The 4-H **cavy** program provides positive learning experiences and opportunities for diverse youth, encouraging them to reach their potential through year-round active involvement in cavy projects and related activities. Cavy projects provide the catalyst for youth to experience and practice life skills until they are mastered and used in everyday activities, helping them develop into competent, capable, caring, and contributing citizens.

Volunteer advisors in 4-H are caring adults who teach youth responsible cavy ownership, husbandry, and the skills needed to safely handle, examine, and show cavies. Providing an emotionally and physically safe environment for members allows them to focus on learning the cognitive and physical skills needed to be successful with their cavy projects.

Members of 4-H are engaged in, practice, and demonstrate proficiencies with their cavies at various cavy shows. They are engaged in hands-on learning opportunities through skillathons, knowledge bowl games, and county and state fair evaluations. They express creativity by designing educational cavy poster displays.

The bond that develops between youth and their pet cavies provides a stimulus for them to help others in their community. Members of 4-H and their cavies, as 4-H PetPALS, visit senior adults in skilled nursing or assisted living facilities. They visit youth and adults with physical or cognitive disabilities. Youth participate with their cavies in 4-H project awareness opportunities in schools and throughout the community.

Youth learn critical thinking skills through opportunities in cavy care, breeding, genetics, and cavy well-being. They learn how to be flexible, as well as how to think clearly and rationally, when confronted with situations while handling and showing their cavies.

Members of 4-H practice setting short-term and long-term goals for their projects and 4-H careers. Youth have opportunities to explore animal science related careers as a result of taking a cavy project.

Guidelines for Completing a 4-H Cavy Project

Each youth taking a 4-H cavy project should follow these guidelines:

1. Follow guidelines for care of cavies as described in this book. Each 4-H cavy project member is required to have access to the *Cavy Resource Handbook*. Individual members can purchase their own copies, or one handbook may be purchased and shared among family members.
2. Complete the *4-H Cavy Project and Record Book* each year a cavy project is taken.
3. Keep accurate project records for each cavy taken.
4. Assume continual care of the project animal(s) throughout the project year.
5. Follow state and county guidelines for ownership and showing.
6. Make sure a project registration and/or entry form is completed and submitted to the county Extension office on time.
7. Know county and state guidelines and rules for fair participation.

Benefits to a 4-H Member

1. **Life Skills Development.** As a cavy owner, you learn many life skills that help you become a responsible and competent individual. Some of these life skills include managing resources, making decisions, solving problems, learning to learn, reasoning, thinking critically, keeping records, planning and organizing, achieving goals, communicating, cooperating, sharing, caring for others, being empathetic, learning through community service, completing a project/task, motivating yourself, and being responsible. What other skills can you think of?
2. **Selection.** Whether you and/or your family currently own a cavy, or you plan to own one in the near future, knowing what questions to ask and breed characteristics to look for make selecting the right cavy a rewarding experience.
3. **Record Keeping.** One requirement for completing your cavy project is keeping accurate records. Inaccurate records do not reflect what you have accomplished with your project. By keeping good records from the beginning of your project, you learn how much it costs to keep your cavy, including expenditures for feed, equipment, health care, and showing. Keep records on a weekly or monthly basis. Do not wait until so much time has passed that it is hard to remember what you have done. Keep receipts when you purchase anything for your project. This helps you learn the expenses involved in owning a cavy.
4. **Nutrition.** You learn the nutrient requirements of cavies, and how their diet affects their overall health.
5. **Health.** You learn how to keep your cavy healthy and prevent diseases.
6. **Competition.** You benefit from learning to care for and show your project, and to compete gracefully.
7. **Ownership Pride.** Owning and caring for cavies gives you a feeling of pride and satisfaction.
8. **Professional and Social Development.** Having a cavy project brings you into contact with successful cavy owners, breeders, and judges, as well as project leaders and other 4-H members.
9. **Career Exploration.** Taking a cavy as a 4-H project introduces you to the animal sciences. This gives you opportunities to explore careers in the animal sciences and related careers.

10. **Animal Welfare.** Your awareness of the issues of animal well-being and ethics is increased. Animals play a vital role in society, and therefore deserve our protection and compassion.

Teamwork for the Common Goal

The purpose of all project work is to enhance the education, experience, and development of young people, a purpose that is not realized without the involvement of several people working as a team. The successful completion of the cavy project depends upon the combined efforts of parents or guardians, experts, 4-H leaders, and you, the 4-H member. All contribute to successful teamwork.

A Message to Parents or Guardians

This *Cavy Resource Handbook* is intended for use by youth ages eight years old and in the third grade through eighteen years old. The reading level and terminology in this book is difficult for a younger 4-H member. **It is very important that a younger 4-H member has the help of an older youth or adult to interpret and understand the information in this book.**

Behind most successful club members are parents or guardians who are truly enthusiastic about the projects their children are taking. These parents offer supervision, assistance, and encouragement to the 4-H member working through projects. The payoff from this involvement is an exciting learning experience, and sometimes results in honors and prizes at county and state fairs. If you are willing to help in these ways, you can make a big difference.

Be aware that while adult support is clearly important, it is equally important that adults not go too far. That is, as a parent or guardian of a 4-H member undertaking a project, you

should assist and supervise only to a reasonable extent. Help out as much as is necessary, but do not do the various chores and requirements called for by the project. These are for the 4-H member to do. Families and 4-H members own the project animals, but 4-H members are responsible for their care and husbandry.

Also keep in mind that most projects, especially those involving animals, require adjustments at home and some investments to be successful. For this project, proper housing, equipment, supplies, nutrition, and health care are needed to help the 4-H member have a successful experience. Resources for keeping records are necessary.

Remember, the 4-H member's success in this and all projects depends to a large extent on the encouragement and support—in the appropriate measures—that only you can give.

A Message to 4-H Advisors

As people directly concerned with youth development, it is the responsibility of all 4-H advisors to help each member who wants to take his or her cavy as a 4-H project (and who has the resources to do so) learn lifelong skills and be successful. Through 4-H meetings and activities, 4H advisors help youth set goals, identify resources, learn public speaking skills, gain confidence, and evaluate their own progress with their cavy projects.

Eight Key Elements for a Positive 4-H Experience Taking Cavy Projects

Eight elements have been identified as key elements in making a young person's 4-H experience a positive one. It is unlikely that all eight elements prevail at one time; however, elements such as a *caring adult* and *safe environment* must be in place at all times. Information below identifies and defines the Eight Key Elements for a Positive 4-H Experience for youth taking cavy projects.

Can you identify more “indicators” of each key element?

1. A Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult

Young people’s understanding of what it means and what it takes to be productive, self-assured citizens depends largely on the adult role models and connections they have. Caring adults serve as guides, mentors, and role models to 4-H members. They help youth discover their personal visions, missions, and lifetime goals. Caring adults help set appropriate boundaries and expectations for youth engaged in 4-H programs.

Indicators of a positive relationship with a caring adult through 4-H cavy projects:

- Adult family members commit to year-round support and participation.
- Volunteers commit to the same youth through the entire 4-H project year.
- Volunteers teach youth age-appropriate subject matter about cavies while supporting their efforts.
- Volunteers guide youth through learning activities while actively participating themselves.
- Volunteers lend their support and expertise as needed year-round.
- Volunteers engage youth in establishing group parameters, rules, behaviors, and expectations.
- Older youth serve as mentors for younger members.

2. An Emotionally and Physically Safe Environment

Youth should not fear physical or emotional harm from our learning environment, adults who work with them, or from other youth. In our world today, this element is especially important. The 4-H organization strives to provide a safe environment at each and every activity involving our youth.

Indicators of a safe environment through 4-H cavy projects:

- Volunteers teach youth safe handling and examining techniques.
- An environment that is safe for introducing youth is created.
- Positive behavior guidelines are set for youth.
- Regional and statewide clinics are offered for volunteers to learn how to work with youth and cavies.

3. A Welcoming Environment

A welcoming environment is one that actively cultivates a sense of group identity and belonging, encourages and supports its members, offers encouragement with positive and specific feedback, and shares the successes of all members of the 4-H group by providing many forms of recognition.

Indicators of a welcoming environment through 4-H cavy projects:

- Volunteers involve all youth in introductory activities.
- Volunteers involve all youth in meetings and club activities.
- Volunteers practice age-appropriate teaching methods, involving older members as mentors of younger members.
- Volunteers create an environment to encourage group decision-making.
- Volunteers consider, evaluate, and give feedback to members’ thoughts, ideas, and decisions.
- Group identity is well established as evidenced by, for example, club t-shirts and banners with club name.
- Volunteers hold recognition events for youth when projects are completed.
- Youth celebrate their successes throughout involvement in the cavy project.

4. *Engagement in Learning*

An engaged youth is one who is not only mindful of the subject area, but who is building relationships and connections to develop greater understanding. The 4-H organization provides opportunities for self-reflection that enable youth to connect what they learn today to their futures. Hands-on learning provides opportunities to develop important life skills.

Indicators of engagement in learning through 4-H cavy projects:

- Cavies are the “hook” that engage youth in hands-on learning opportunities specific to cavy subject matter.
- Cavies are vehicles that engage youth in a broad scope of 4-H opportunities such as camps, international programs, complementary projects, award trips, and scholarships.
- Youth take ownership of their group and design a project plan for accomplishing their goals with their cavy projects.
- Youth learn many life skills as a result of engagement in cavy projects.

5. *Mastery and Competence in a Chosen Activity or Subject Matter*

Young people learn best when the program or activity is centered on a topic that is of personal interest or a passion. Providing an opportunity for mastery and competence allows youth to experience success and achievement that in turn serve as building blocks for their success—not only in 4-H, but also in their school and community work.

Indicators of mastery and competence through 4-H cavy projects:

- Cavies and cavy subject matter provide the topic of personal interest.
- Youth practice and demonstrate skills with their handling, examining, and showing their cavies.

- Youth practice and demonstrate skills related to educational cavy activities, such as a skillathon, poster contest, and knowledge bowls.
- Youth set goals and objectives for projects and activities in which they participate.
- Youth take turns teaching each other.
- Youth become confident in their abilities.

6. *Self-Determination*

Youth must believe they can impact the events in their lives, rather than events having control over them. The opportunities we provide through 4-H help youth foster a personal sense of influence over their lives, exercising their potential to become self-directing, autonomous adults.

Indicators of self-determination through 4-H cavy projects:

- Volunteers and older youth are involved as facilitators, mentors, and teen leaders.
- Youth are a part of the decision-making process for group activities.
- Youth learn critical thinking skills and how to improve their skills through activities related to their cavy projects.
- Youth learn to be prepared for the unexpected when working with and raising cavies.
- Youth learn how to be flexible as well as how to think clearly and rationally when confronted with situations during handling and examination of cavies.

7. *Opportunity to Value and Practice Service for Others*

Service is a way for 4-H members to gain exposure to the larger community and the world. It is necessary for youth to actively practice and value serving others. Many times, this experience enables young people to recognize the difference they can make for others and for their communities.

Indicators of valuing and practicing service for others through 4-H cavy projects:

- Volunteers and older youth serve as mentors to help younger members participate in club activities and safely work with their cavies.
- Youth have the opportunity to participate with their pet cavies in 4-H PetPALS, an intergenerational community service project.
- Youth have the opportunity to volunteer at a local animal shelter, humane society, or veterinary clinic.
- 4-H cavy projects serve as a stepping stone for youth's continued interest and participation in other community service projects and activities.

8. *Active Participation in the Future*

Providing youth with the opportunity to see themselves in the future gives them the hope and optimism to shape their life choices accordingly. Leaders can teach all the facts and figures in various subject matter areas, but if they don't link the information to the future, those facts and figures will likely go unused. The 4-H organization is committed to positive youth development programs that make the connection from today's activities to tomorrow's successes.

Indicators of seeing one's self as an active participant in the future through 4-H cavy projects:

- Youth have opportunities to explore careers related to the animal sciences.
- Youth have opportunities to outline and realize goals.
- Youth have opportunities to make decisions about future activities and programs not inclusive to 4-H cavy projects.
- 4-H cavy projects may serve as the stepping stone to future involvement with cavies and animal science related fields.

A Message to 4-H Members

After you have made the decision to take a cavy project, it is important to know what you want to learn throughout the project year. Pet cavies are year-round companions as well as project animals. Cavies raised for breeding, showing, and to sell are an investment that requires more involvement than owning one pet cavy. Information in this resource handbook should help you learn more about cavies and better prepare you to be successful with your project. Learning about the cavy's history, selection, housing and equipment, nutrition, breeding, and showing helps you understand more about cavies.

By teaching you these principles through information and experience, this project makes it possible for you to be a responsible and knowledgeable cavy owner. To have a successful project you must be willing to study and review and apply the information contained in this handbook.

Results of 4-H Youth Development Programs

Research has shown that as a result of 4-H Youth Development Programs:

1. *Youth develop marketable skills for lifelong success.*

Youth gain important leadership, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. These abilities are gained through the numerous projects and activities in which youth participate as 4-H members. Such skills are important not only to immediate success of the 4-H projects but to continued success of many endeavors.

2. Youth engage in community service and citizenship to transform local communities.

This goes beyond just conducting a project; its focus is on recognizing that youth can make valuable contributions to their local communities. Youth can make a difference.

3. Youth appreciate and build upon diversity to foster a harmonious global society.

This is a critical awareness tool for success of youth today and far into the future. Rather than looking at the differences in people as potential sources of conflict and disengagement, our goal is for our youth to recognize these differences as opportunities for positive and rewarding experiences.

4. Youth build sustained relationships with adults that enable them to become better citizens.

Most of us can remember the significance of certain adults in our lives. Similarly, adult 4-H volunteers should make a tremendous positive impact on the lives of 4-H youth.

5. Volunteers build skills and abilities to more effectively work with youth.

Land-grant universities throughout the nation provide educational opportunities in subject areas, working effectively with youth and leading positive youth development programs. Extension professionals and other university faculty and staff teach volunteers the many skills and abilities needed to work effectively with youth through educational workshops, clinics, and conferences.

Chapter 1: Animal Care and Well-Being

Everyone associated with cavies—whether they are raised for show, for breeding, or as pets—is responsible for the well-being of their animals. As a 4-H member, you need to learn to care properly for animals and develop acceptable cavy husbandry skills. The purpose of this chapter is to alert you to the importance of this topic and ask you to spend a few moments reflecting on its significance. Although some of the topics discussed here are also discussed elsewhere in this book (health, showing), the emphasis here is on how you can do your best job providing the best care for the best results—a happy and healthy animal.



Privileges, Responsibilities, and Rewards

Your duty as a 4-H member is to properly care for your cavies. As a 4-H animal owner, you need to understand the privileges, responsibilities, and rewards that you can expect from the 4-H program.

Privileges

- To know as much about your project as possible
- To receive information to raise and care for your project
- To be given a variety of experiences relating to project work
- To be given sound guidance and direction
- To ask questions and share concerns
- To be recognized

Responsibilities

- To treat all cavies in your possession humanely
- To be sincere and believe in a value of a job well done
- To be loyal to the values and ideals of the 4-H program
- To accept the guidance and decisions of the program coordinators/advisors
- To be willing to learn and participate in training programs and meetings
- To continue learning throughout your years of 4-H membership
- To follow safe practices insuring a safe, wholesome product of the highest quality

Rewards

- To enjoy satisfaction from a job well done
- To enjoy the companionship of a pet cavy
- To receive both public and personal recognition
- To learn new skills, receive special training, and experience personal growth
- To make new friends and have fun
- To feel good about producing healthy and well-cared-for offspring
- To know you are special and can make a difference

Cavy Well-Being

As a 4-H member you need to be aware of the things you can do with your own cavies to promote animal well-being. The image of owning and raising cavies and the 4-H program are affected by the decisions you make and the actions you take in the care of your cavy. You need to set goals and develop a plan that will positively impact your animal's well-being—either in your caviary, your backyard, your home, or at the county fair.

You can complete some tasks before you even obtain your guinea pigs. First, think about the size your cavy will be as it grows to maturity. Are your cages large enough for the cavy to play and exercise? Are there hazards where you are going to keep your cavy, such as gaping holes, protruding nails, broken boards, or wire? Can the cavy reach any potentially dangerous objects (for example, an electrical cord or a poisonous plant)? Think about the type of housing your cavy will need, and where the cages are kept. Is the location where your cavy will be dry and warm, or cool, depending on the weather, and free from drafts? You should have an ample supply of clean water available to your cavies at all times. Feed bowls should be kept free of droppings, urine, and bedding. Water bottles should be provided versus water bowls for this reason.

Once your cavy arrives and is in your care, providing it with a nutritionally balanced diet is an important first step. Be sure your cavy receives the nutrition it needs in relation to its age, growth cycle, and purpose. Your cavy also needs special consideration if it is pregnant, lactating, or servicing sows.

Cavy Health

When questions or concerns arise, involve your veterinarian. Develop a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) so your veterinarian is aware you own one or more cavies, and you are able to contact him or her at any time your cavy needs veterinary attention. Discuss a wellness or health plan with your veterinarian. As the caretaker of your cavy, it is very important that you follow your veterinarian's instructions regarding any treatment program. Check with your veterinarian before administering treatments as there are only a few drugs approved for use in cavies or that cavies can tolerate.

When raising cavies, each animal in your care should have an ear tag for identification purposes. Individual animal identification enables good record keeping from which you can measure your progress. If your cavy becomes lost, stolen, or needs medical attention when you are not available, the only certain way to know the animal's identity and health history is by permanent identification.

Acquainting yourself with your cavy by handling and training it needs to begin at an early age or as soon as you acquire your animal. Spend time with your cavy daily. This helps both you and your animal develop trust and become accustomed to each other. You also become aware of what sounds or sights bother your cavy and its reaction to them. Handling your cavy daily also helps you to recognize abnormal behavior in your animal that could signal illness, stress, or pain. The longer you avoid working with your cavy, the more difficult training and preparation for show becomes. The two P's—practice and patience—usually pay off.

From the day you acquire your cavy until the day it leaves your care, maintain feed, breeding, and treatment records. This is important for the continual care of your cavy and for whoever might later purchase your animal. This is also the best way to keep track of the kinds and amounts of expenses you have incurred with your project.

Finally, if you plan to exhibit your cavy for show or sale, continue the same quality care program throughout the exhibition as you did at home. This starts by transporting your cavy safely in an appropriate carrying cage, and with concern for its well-being. The exhibition area should be prepared and checked ahead of time, just as you prepared your space at home when you first acquired your cavy. Continually watch your cavy for signs of stress, pain, or illness. Anytime your cavy is housed on the show grounds, be sure it has clean water at all times, clean bedding, and is fed daily.

Above all, enjoy your cavy project experience. You should feel good about the knowledge you gain, and the quality care program you develop and implement with your cavy project.

Quality Assurance for Cavies

With most cavies being raised as pets or for show—and breeding these cavies is for the same purposes—animal well-being is emphasized over quality assurance. Quality assurance is a systematic monitoring and evaluation of a product to maximize the probability that the required standards are being met for that product to be of high quality for the consumer or purchaser. If you are breeding cavies, or raising them to sell to ethnic markets for meat, you are providing a product to the consumer.

Think back to some time when you bought a toy or other product and were disappointed. Would you buy it again? Consumers will choose to buy or not buy a product from their

perception of the value of that product. What would happen to a business if no one purchased its products?

Many businesses have quality assurance departments to make sure their products are of the highest quality. Businesses pay attention to quality assurance because that helps to assure consumer satisfaction. When quality is high, consumers will buy again.

Everyone involved in breeding cavies is obligated to do his or her part to provide a safe, wholesome animal to the buyer.

Cavy Show Ethics

One of the most visible components of 4-H is animal shows—livestock, poultry, rabbit, and small and companion animals. Much of the public's contact with 4-H is at the county fair where show ring events draw large crowds. What the audience sees reflects on the total 4-H program. How are you contributing to that image?



The desire to win at any cost can tarnish the record of 4-H members personally, and animal shows in general. Why have YOU chosen to show a cavy? What motivates some to act dishonestly when showing cavies?

Competition, if you keep it in perspective, can be a positive tool to help develop important skills in your life. Many 4-H alumni who showed animals during their 4-H years attribute successes in their careers to the diverse skills gained as a 4-H member. You can use decision-making skills and critical-thinking techniques to select your cavy and choose the right breeding program to produce quality show animals. Answering the judges' questions in a confident manner helps you gain poise, which is beneficial in many other situations. Good sportsmanship is a characteristic we all need.

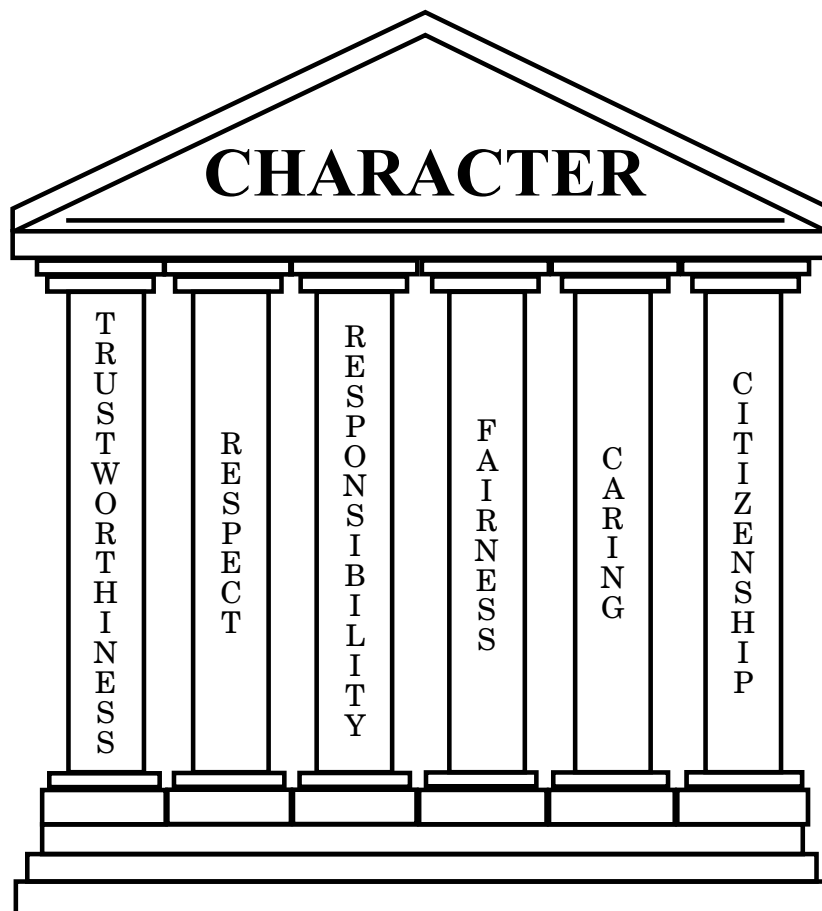
Certainly self-esteem is affected in the show ring when people watch and applaud your performance!

Proper preparation of your cavy for show should include techniques that do not risk injury or pain to the animal, nor alter the cavy's appearance. If a TV camera were present when you were working with your cavy, would you do anything differently than you do normally? Spending many hours of handling and posing your cavy is the only way to achieve that confident look when showing, with the animal responding to your showing techniques.

Is your only goal to win, or do you want to get more out of it than that? The effects of unethical practices on animals can be harmful or even fatal. Think about what will stay with you after the thrill of winning has faded.

Pillars of Character

- Trustworthiness. Be honest, stand up for what is right, be reliable.
- Respect. Judge people on their merits or good things they do, respect others, be tolerant.
- Responsibility. Do your best, be a good example, be accountable, think before you act.
- Fairness. Use the same rules or standards for everyone, be open-minded, listen.
- Caring. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, be kind, help those in need.
- Citizenship. Be committed to the welfare of your community, state, or country.



Source: Josephson's Institute of Ethics