

## 4-H Volunteer Leaders' Series

# Positive Approaches to Behavior Problems

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Working successfully with youth in groups requires an understanding of developmental needs and youth group dynamics along with a special type of patience and tolerance.

A leader should manage group activities in a way that will best meet the purposes of the group. Thus, it is necessary to establish and maintain a level of structure and discipline that is effective.

Each group exhibits different characteristics. Each leader has a different personality. It takes time and experience for a person to discover or evolve a style of leadership that best fits his or her character and personality.

### Behavior and Basic Developmental Needs

An ever-present concern of leaders is successful management of the youth group. Needs of the individuals must be met while goals of the group are also achieved. Youth leaders, therefore, find themselves grappling with various strategies and approaches to discipline.

All people behave in ways that they think will meet their needs. We often respond to those behaviors from reflex rather than from understanding. We respond in defense of our own needs or from misunderstanding the needs or intentions of others. Many actions of persons that are labeled or perceived as misconduct are basically inappropriate attempts to meet personal needs.

Children and youth have specific developmental needs. All human behavior results from individual attempts to meet those needs – physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Youth groups serve to meet some of these important needs:

- **A Sense of Belonging and Personal Security** – The desire to belong is natural and helps bring children in contact with others. This satisfies the need for friends. Belonging helps children to grow because much of their feelings of personal security and self-worth come from what others think of them and the values that others place on them.
- **Feelings of Independence and Self-Reliance** – Becoming independent of adults is a sign of growing up. The desire to be independent is often troublesome for parents and leaders, but it cannot be avoided if the boy or girl is to grow up normally.
- **Opportunities to Achieve and Be Recognized** – Young people want to know that their efforts are noticed, appreciated and worthwhile. The rate of achievement varies with each child; therefore, projects and activities need to be varied and appropriate for the group members. A meaningful part of the sense of achievement comes from opportunities to do things for others that are openly or publicly recognized.



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- **Opportunities for New Experiences and Adventures (Excitement)** – Young people want and need a variety of new experiences. Each new experience adds to their maturity and to their developing self-image. Alert leaders can guide the episodes of experience and adventure into wholesome, maturing experiences. They can also help youth recognize the new experiences and adventure in the “everyday” tasks.
- **To Experience Affection or Love** – Affection or love is essential in healthy personality development. We all need to know that we are loved and accepted regardless of our shortcomings.

## Five-Step Approach to Behavior Problems

Keeping in mind the needs of youth, think of youth behaviors or situations that are or have been problems for you. Practice the five-step method in analyzing your problem situations. A good way to practice is to write responses to the five steps:

1. **Describe the Situation.** Objectively summarize the circumstances and behaviors. Try not to make judgments at this point. Merely outline the obvious facts of the situation.
2. **What Is the Problem?** Describe and label the actions or behaviors that you see as problems. Who is involved?
3. **Whose Problem Is It?** Look at the behavior. Determine for whom it is a problem and why. Is it a problem for the child, other children, the group, other leaders, parents or others? Is it really a problem? How serious a problem is it?
4. **What Are the Needs?** Try to determine which basic needs the child is trying to meet. To what extent can you meet or arrange for the meeting of those needs?
5. **Possible Solutions.** Consider several possible solutions that might remedy the problem behavior. Will this solution in some way account for meeting the real needs of the child, the children or the group?

## Have a Realistic Attitude

As long as you work with youth groups (regardless of your skill, experience and understanding), you will encounter occasional problem behavior – problems, at least from your point of view. Can you accept that reality?

If you have idealistic or unrealistic expectations, you will likely experience more disappointment, hurt, frustration and exasperation. You will tend to over-react to situations and unintentionally make them worse.

If, however, your expectations are more in line with reality, you will be able to take certain behaviors in stride. They won't be as likely to seem like problems but, rather, just part of normal behavior. You will be much more likely to experience the rewards and joys of working with youth groups.

## Guidelines for Discipline

No listing of specific guidelines of discipline, punishment or control can possibly accommodate all of the various leadership styles or group situations that one will encounter. Each individual must work out a style (or styles) that seems to work best in various situations.

The following pointers have been selected for consideration because they relate to basic realities of human nature and group behavior. Understanding and accepting these realities can help a leader establish an atmosphere that will minimize the occurrence and intensity of conflicts, disruptions and misbehaviors.

- Accept each child at his/her present level of development. Try to establish a warm friendly relationship. This will go a long way toward nurturing further development and good relationships.
- Establish an atmosphere of mutual trust, liking and respect. Whenever possible make your comments and behavior positive and encouraging.
- Be certain that you are honest in recognizing the personal needs, feelings and motives that lead to your behavior.
- Recognize the difference between what you do to get through a situation and what you can do to resolve a basic issue.
- Consider that changing your attitude or approach may be the most effective way to arrive at a solution to a behavior problem.
- Limit rules to those that are necessary and in the general interest of the group. Try to ensure that everyone clearly understands them and their purposes. Enforce them calmly, firmly and

impartially. Children understand and appreciate the need for rules. Rules can be discussed and evolved into accepted agreements.

- Discipline is not the same as punishment. Discipline implies training or behavior that leads to self-control. Punishment is a tactic that can be used to enforce discipline or to control a situation. In most circumstances, reasonable certainty of punishment is more of a deterrent to misbehavior than is the type or severity.
- Do not make threats you cannot or will not carry out. Better yet, do not make threats at all. When the occasion demands, act swiftly and decisively.
- Do not argue with or nag group members. Do take time to carefully explain.
- Sometimes the best response is to ignore a behavior.

- Never speak disrespectfully of a child's parents, home or upbringing. That is a quick way to lose respect.
- If you receive satisfaction from threatening, embarrassing or punishing a child, reexamine your motives.
- You are human. Be willing to acknowledge your mistakes and learn from them. Then carry on.

The key factor in managing a successful youth group is the attitude of the leader. The leader sets the tone, establishes the atmosphere and is the role model. Establish some ideals for yourself as a leader of youth. Strive to become what you want to be as a youth leader. Striving will help you reach your goal; but be realistic: Don't expect to be "ideal." Just expect and work toward improvement and it will come.

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