

# Manage Group Activities for Safety, Efficiency, and Effective Learning



Detailed information about the purpose of 4-H projects and use of experiential learning methods can be found in the *projects* selection of this Guide. This section covers the practical matters of handling behavior.

## What is Normal, Acceptable Behavior? (Belonging)

This depends on the children's ages and the situation. What is okay for nine-year-olds at a recreation activity, is probably not appropriate for teenagers on an educational tour. The fine line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior is crossed when any of the following occur:

- Anyone is in danger of physical or mental harm.
- The behavior is disruptive to the activity of the group.
- The rights of others (in the group or bystanders) are infringed upon.

How can you detect unacceptable behavior?

- When you notice that any of the above three items have occurred or are likely to occur.
- When you observe negative reactions from other children.
- When you, as an adult, are not comfortable with the behavior. (Make sure your views are not so strict or lenient that they do not allow for mainstream interests and actions of children. If in doubt, ask other parents.)

## Setting Boundaries (Belonging)

Working with youth, especially other people's children, can be a challenge. While some children are better behaved than others, they all need acceptance and the opportunity to learn. In mixed groups, the challenge of a youth leader is to see that disruptive youth do not impede learning or fun for others. Their very presence in the group, combined with your wise guidance, will help them learn how to be respectful, positive members of a learning community.

## Clear Expectations (Belonging)

Uncertainty and confusion add stress to individuals and groups and can lead to acting-out behavior. When norms of group behavior are simple and clear, then members generally respond well. Too many rules, constantly changing expectations, or unclear consequences often set the stage for negative behavior.

## Levels of Consequence (Belonging)

Begin with the least restrictive response. Hopefully the problem will be solved before many levels of response are needed. At each level of consequence, seek to engage the youth in positive choices by reinforcing positive behavior.

The first level of confronting negative behavior can be a simple word of correction, spoken privately to the individual in

need of correction. The private and respectful presentation of the correction will avoid embarrassing or belittling the individual in front of the group. One approach might be, "Here is the problem, what can we do about it?"

A second level of consequence might be a "time-out" or separation from the group's activity. A time-out gives the individual an opportunity to feel the consequences of negative behavior and consider future actions. The approach might be, "Sit here for five minutes and then let me know how you intend to participate when you return to the group."

A third level of consequence can be isolation from the group, such as going to another (supervised) location for a significant time. The group will be able to continue and the individual will experience the severity of the problem behavior. This intervention should include a discussion with the leader of the program regarding the need to make different choices if the child wishes to continue in the program. Return to the next group session would require readiness to commit to the group's norms.

Finally, the fourth level of response may be removing the member from the group permanently or at least until a new beginning is possible.

### **Motivate Members Through Positive Reinforcement (Mastery)**

Positive reinforcement is the single most effective tool for motivating youth. It is also very important in discipline.

Youth need constant reinforcement for their positive activities. But providing positive reinforcement is not easy. It requires a positive outlook on your part and

must be practiced. It comes in two forms: verbal and nonverbal.

When giving positive reinforcement it is important to be specific and sincere. Don't say, "John, you've done a good job." Say specifically what the child did: "John, your carrot cake looks good and tastes great—good job!" Being too general with positive comments may appear artificial or phony.

Unfortunately, most people find it easier to be critical than positive. To overcome this, focus on the strengths and successes (even small ones) of your members. Help them to accept themselves so that they can accept others. Following your lead, they will also learn to give positive feedback to others.

Give positive reinforcement constantly. Here are some simple ways to do it:

- A smile.
- A nod.
- An enthusiastic and encouraging comment.
- Saying "thank you".
- Asking a member to demonstrate skills to the rest of the group.

There are literally thousands of ways to show positive reinforcement. As you see the results of your words and actions, the importance of positive reinforcement will be quite clear and you will find your own ways to provide it both verbally and non-verbally. In the meantime, you can find some more suggestions in *Ways to Say "Good for You."* (Toolkit 14)

### **Work as a Team (Mastery)**

Group members will commit to group goals and expectations when they have had a part in setting those targets. Members who have chosen the expectations together, will be more likely to work coop-

## **Attention to Youth Development (Independence)**

The goal of effective behavior management is to assist young people in making positive decisions about their own behavior and actions. The goal is not simply compliance but joyful participation. Effective behavior management begins by creating a safe, secure, and comfortable setting for the group's activities. When needs for security, belonging, and recognition are being met, acting out and misbehavior will less likely occur.

## **A Well-Planned Program (Independence)**

Effective behavior management is rooted in good program organization and strong leadership. Well prepared, relevant, and exciting programs will capture the imaginations and energy of the participants and will deter disruptive and negative behavior patterns.

Children thrive on new experiences and successful goal achievement. When they are actively engaged, they do not succumb to the boredom or discouragement that leads to negative behavior.

## **Prevention is Better Than the Cure (Generosity)**

Understanding the motivations of youth is important to understanding their behaviors. Through your actions, you can help youth be motivated. You can help motivate in the following ways:

- Use a variety of teaching methods. This helps keep both the teachers and the learners from becoming bored. Boredom is a major enemy of motivation, and often leads to unacceptable behavior as children battle the boredom.
- Involve as many youth as possible in planning and doing. This gives them ownership in the group and therefore, a feeling of belonging. Also, kids will usually be more interested in something *they* say they want to do, as opposed to something that *someone else* thinks they want to do.
- Try giving a disruptive member a special job to help you or the club. Often, disruptive behavior is a plea for attention. Help the member channel that energy and need in a positive direction.
- Focus on *doing* more and watch kids want to try things themselves. Remember the "Learn by Doing" philosophy of 4-H.

