



Positive Discipline for Children

What is Expected Behavior?

Working with youth, especially other people's children, can be a challenge. All children need acceptance and the opportunity to learn. The challenge of a leader is to see that youth learn and have fun while keeping disruptive behavior to a minimum. Being in a 4-H club under adult guidance, youth will learn what is socially acceptable and how to do what is right. The following tips can be helpful:

- All people, including youth, have positive qualities.
- Discipline should be firm but fair (and not harsh/inconsistent).
- Using a positive approach and positive reinforcement is better than punishment.
- When adults set limits, youth learn what is expected of them and are made aware of the consequences for non-compliance.
- Emphasize the idea of bad *behaviors*, not bad children.
- Adults should be part of the solution, as positive role models, and not part of the problem, as poor examples.
- Youth *will* make mistakes. This should be seen as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Rules of behavior should be set in advance, with the involvement of the children. Don't assume that youth know what you expect. They may be accustomed to totally different rules and expectations at home or in school. Choices should be considered corresponding to expected behaviors and consequences for non-compliance.

Expected/appropriate behavior results in the following:

- Children stay safe from physical or emotional harm.
- The activity or educational session can be conducted without distraction.
- The rights of others are respected.

How Do You Respond to Unacceptable Behavior?

Unacceptable behavior threatens one or more of the previously listed expected behaviors and should be addressed at the moment it occurs.

1. Identify what is the unacceptable behavior/problem and be sure it really IS a problem.
2. When confronting the unacceptable behavior, use the "I" message which consists of three parts:
 - the specific behavior,
 - the feeling experienced because of the behavior, and
 - the tangible effect on the person(s) affected by the behavior.



An “I” message is formulated in this way: I feel **(feelings)** when you **(behavior)** because **(reason)**. Here is an “I” message example: “I feel distracted and have difficulty teaching when you tap on the table with your pencil.”

3. Redirect/refocus the youth to the task at hand: if that doesn’t resolve the issue try number 4.
4. Set limits with consequences.
5. After redirecting and setting limits, give control/responsibility back to the child to resume participation.
 - reassure that the child is accepted in the group
 - discuss with the child alternative behaviors and lessons learned

The Art of Setting Limits

There are three key concepts to setting limits. Limits should be:

- *Clear/concise* – Use few words and sentences to ensure understanding.
- *Reasonable* – It must be appropriate to retain your credibility.
- *Enforceable* – Can you make it happen?

In addition, you must follow through when the limits have been set. Otherwise, the behavior will continue and the other youth will disregard your authority.

Being Proactive is the Best Approach

By taking a proactive approach, group activities can keep youth interested and combat boredom which is often the cause of disruptive behavior. You can help in the following ways:

- Involve as many youth as possible in planning and doing. This gives them ownership in the group and therefore, a feeling of belonging. Also, children will usually be more interested in something they say *they* want to do than something that someone *else* thought they would like to do.
- Try giving a disruptive child a special job to help you or the group. Many times disruptive behavior is simply a plea for attention. Help the child channel that energy into something more productive.
- Focus on *doing* more than watching and listening. Children want to *try* things themselves. Show them how and then let them do it! This is the “learn by doing” philosophy of 4-H.



Summary

- All children have the potential to behave in an appropriate manner.
- By making learning fun and interesting, you can minimize boredom and disruptive behavior.
- Use the “I” message when responding to inappropriate behavior.
- Don’t react to symptoms, but aim for the root of the problem.
- Don’t overreact to age appropriate behaviors.
- Before responding to what you perceive is a problem behavior, confirm to yourself that it really is a problem worth doing something about.
- Keep in mind that children are not miniature adults.
- If one approach doesn’t work, try something else! Approach behavior problems with creativity and humor.
- Be as patient as humanly possible.

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Did You Know...



The National 4-H Youth Conference Center, located just outside Washington D.C., is owned and operated by the National 4-H Council as a training and development center for 4-H youth and adults. It is home of Citizenship Washington Focus and National 4-H Conference.

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