

New  
Jersey **4-H**

# Leader Training Series



## Positive Discipline for Children

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. Especially in mixed groups, the challenge of a youth leader is to see that disruptive youth do not prevent learning or fun for others. Their very presence in the group, combined with your wise guidance, will help them learn what is socially acceptable and how to do what is right. This information sheet will help you understand children better and provide some ideas on how to deal with the unruly kids with minimal disruption of the learning situation.

## Assumptions

This information sheet is based on the assumptions that:

- All children have positive qualities.
- Understanding motivations which make children behave the way they do will help adults respond more effectively.
- Using a positive approach and positive reinforcement is better than punishment.
- When given the behavior choices and respective consequences, children will respond with appropriate behavior.
- 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.

## What is normal, acceptable behavior?

- This depends on age, situation. What is okay for nine year-olds on a recreational outing may not be acceptable for high school students on an educational tour.
- The often fine line between acceptable and unacceptable 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 are infringed upon

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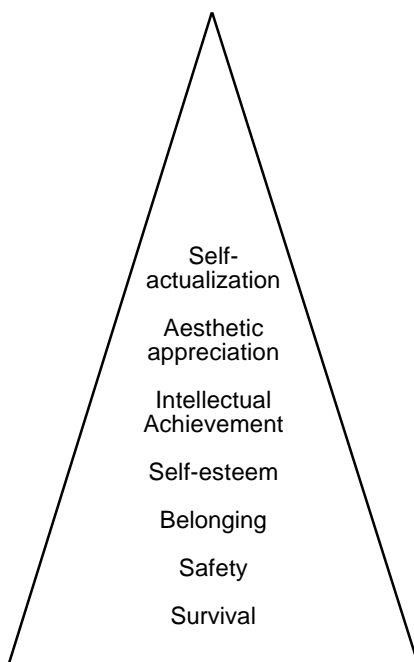
## How can you detect unacceptable behavior?

- When you notice that any of the previous three items have occurred or are likely to occur.
- When you observe negative reaction from other children.
- As an adult, you are not comfortable with the behavior. (Just be sure your views are not so conservative that they do not allow for mainstream interests and actions of children!)

## Motivation is the key to human behavior

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is one theory of motivation. It theorizes that people must meet lower needs before being able to address higher functions.

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



- Survival (the very basic need for food, water, air, and shelter—lowest level)
- Safety (the need to feel physically and psychologically secure and free from danger)
- Belonging (the need to be accepted and loved)
- Self-esteem (the desire to gain approval and recognition)
- Intellectual achievement (the need to understand and explore)
- Aesthetic appreciation (the search for order, structure, and beauty)
- Self actualization (highest level—self-fulfillment and the realization of all that a person is capable of being)

If you determine why a difficult child is acting in an unacceptable way, you can better respond to the root of the problem and not just the symptom. Also, by helping children meet basic needs, you can also help them be motivated to higher levels of achievement. For instance, if a child does not have proper diet or adequate clothing, he or she may not have the energy or physical comfort to concentrate on learning. If a youth worries about meeting the neighborhood bully on the way to your club meeting, the member may choose not to show up. Furthermore, if a child does not feel accepted in your group, the youngster will not want to be part of your group. Offering get-acquainted activities help all of the group members get to know each other better and feel comfortable working together.

## How do you respond to unacceptable behavior?

1. First and foremost, determine that the problem is really a problem.

*Ask yourself "Whose problem is this really?"*

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## Prevention is better than cure

2. Use the least obtrusive discipline measure possible. In other words, don't cause a scene that creates a problem more disruptive than the original discipline problem itself! For instance, don't stop in the middle of a lesson you are teaching to verbally discipline a child. This only brings attention to the disruptive behavior. Instead, your mere physical presence near the child while you continue your demonstration or stern eye contact only the disruptive child can see will be just as effective.

3. Consider laws, liability issues. Dealing with other people's children may be different than working with your own. Use methods that would be acceptable to most people.

4. Earn respect—credibility. This takes time to develop mutual trust. Your goal is not to become a “buddy” but a role model who leads by example.

5. Be firm but fair (and not harsh/inconsistent). Giving partial treatment loses your credibility and is discriminatory. You are not in a popularity contest and, sometimes, the decisions you need to make won't be liked by everyone.

Understanding the motivations of children is important to understanding their behaviors. Better yet, through your actions, you can help youth be motivated. Motivation comes from within a person. But you can help in the following ways:

- Use a variety of teaching/learning methods. This helps both the teacher and the learner from becoming bored. Boredom is a major enemy of motivation and leads to unacceptable behavior used by a child to combat 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 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. Kids want to *try* things themselves. Show them how and then let them do it! This is the “learn by doing” philosophy of 4-H.

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## Key thoughts to *positive* learning and discipline:

- Positive discipline is the art of catching children doing things right (and letting them know it).
- Set rules of behavior in advance, with involvement of children affected. Don't assume that youth know what you expect: they may be accustomed to totally different rules and expectations at home or in school.
- Give kids choices in advance—corresponding to behaviors and respective consequences.

## Summary

- All children have the potential to behave in an appropriate fashion.
- By making learning fun, youth will be motivated to behave in an acceptable way.
- Vary your responses to children's behavior based on the suspected motivations of why they are acting that way.
- Don't react to symptoms, but aim for the root of the problems.
- Don't overreact to "normal" 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.
- Use the least obtrusive discipline possible.
- 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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### ***References:***

*Maslow, A.H. (1970). Motivation and personality. New York: Harper and Row.*

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