



4-H VOLUNTEER TRAINING SERIES

Positive Discipline for Youth



A Rewarding Challenge

Working with youth, especially other people's, can be a challenge. While some are better behaved than others, they all need acceptance and the opportunity to learn. Especially in groups of mixed ages, experience, or interests, the challenge of a youth leader is to see that disruptive youth do not prevent others from learning or having fun. 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 to understand youth better and to provide some ideas on how to deal with the unruly kids with minimal disruption of the learning situation.

Assumptions

The concept of positive discipline is based on the following assumptions:

- All youth have positive qualities.
- Understanding motivations that make youth behave the way they do will help adults respond more effectively.
- Using a positive approach and positive reinforcement is better than punishment.
- When given information about behavior choices and their respective consequences, youth will respond with the behavior that maximizes their benefit while reducing their discomfort.
- Behaviors can be bad, but youth are not bad.
- Adults should make sure they serve as positive role models, because youth learn from what they see adults doing.

Why Do Youth Misbehave?

While youth might misbehave for a variety of reasons, there are some common reasons that you should be aware of and consider in your programming and dealings with youth.

1. **Bored:** Youth who are bored are more likely to engage in inappropriate behavior in order to entertain themselves. Planning activities that keep youth engaged can help prevent this from happening.
2. **Upset:** Youth can become disruptive as a result of being upset. Keep in mind that they can be upset about something that happened either in your setting or at another location. If a child arrives in a bad mood, you might want to take them aside and see if you can help them calm down and feel better.

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3. **Lacking something:** Youth who don't get enough sleep, enough to eat, enough attention, or enough affection may become irritable or seek attention from peers or adults. Make sure that there are breaks and opportunities to eat, and encourage youth to get enough sleep. For those youth who do not receive much attention or affection at home, finding good ways for them to get positive attention will be critical.
4. **Situation inappropriate to their developmental level:** Sometimes we try to get youth to tolerate more than they are capable of tolerating, and this can lead to bad behavior. For example, staying still or quiet for a longer period of time than their developmental level allows can lead to problems on a field trip; providing information that is beyond the level of the youth can also lead to disruptive behavior due to boredom. Alternatively, activities that are at too low a developmental level can also lead to boredom and frustration. Knowing the needs of your group and planning accordingly can help prevent problem behaviors.

Setting the Stage

1. **Setting rules:** While it is important for you, as the adult, to set some rules that are imperative to the safety and well-being of your youth, it is a good idea to get the youth themselves involved in developing additional rules, because they will be more invested in following them if they are involved in creating them. At your first meeting, the group should take time to establish ground rules for behavior and consequences. An example is to have the youth list three behaviors and consequences for youth and adults, and the adults do the same. Then each share, discuss, and identify your rules. Have the youth and adults make a poster of the rules and consequences that should be up front at all meetings.
2. **Youth involvement:** Involve as many club members as possible in planning and doing activities for the group. This gives them a sense of ownership and increases investment in the group and therefore helps them develop a feeling of belonging. Also, kids will usually be more interested in something they say they want to do, rather than something that someone else thought they would like to do. Feeling interested in

activities and invested in the group will increase the likelihood of appropriate behavior.

3. **Engaging activities:** Choosing hands-on activities found in 4-H project books that are divided into age-range categories is a great way to keep youth engaged. It is also important to keep the business time to your 4-H club meetings within a 10–15 minute timeframe and to make sure the meetings represent a mix of activity types. Check out other documents from the 4-H Volunteer Training Series that will help you provide a climate of learning and fun.

What Is Unacceptable Behavior?

This depends on age and the 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:

- Danger of physical or mental harm
- Behavior disruptive to the group activity
- Infringement upon the rights of others

How Can You Detect Unacceptable Behavior?

Here are three clues:

- Youth are in danger of harm, the activity is being disrupted, or the rights of others are being infringed upon.
- You observe negative reactions from other youth.
- 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 youth!)

Think Before Responding to Unacceptable Behavior

1. First and foremost, determine that the problem is really a problem that you should address. Ask yourself, "Whose problem is this?"
2. Use the least obtrusive discipline measure possible. In other words, don't cause a scene that creates more disruption.

3. Consider laws and 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 and credibility. It takes time to develop mutual trust. Your goal is not to become a "buddy" but to become a role model who leads by example.
5. Be firm but fair (not harsh/inconsistent). Being consistent in applying the rules lets the youth know that you mean what you say and that the rules should be taken seriously.

You are not in a popularity contest, and sometimes the decisions you need to make won't be liked by everyone, but as long as you appear to be consistent and fair, you will be respected.

Prevention: Strategies and Tools

Skillful and successful leaders monitor youth behavior, anticipate unhappy consequences, and either prevent or intervene before those consequences become reality. We can do that by addressing any challenging behavior that we see, and by intervening in such a way that we don't make the problem worse. We need to learn and practice some simple and respectful ways in which we can intervene verbally or nonverbally when we see unacceptable behavior. Think of these strategies as tools. None of these tools work all the time, so the more tools you can have at your fingertips, the more likely it is that you will be successful with youth.

Responses that work are respectful, preserve youths' dignity, and redirect their behavior. Those are reasons to start with very simple and non-threatening tools first. These simple non-verbal tools act as reminders for youth and allow them to monitor their own behavior.

Non-Verbal Strategies (see table on page 4)

Verbal Strategies (see table on page 5)

No one strategy works with every child or in every situation, especially not with challenging behavior, but there are a variety of strategies that can be useful in managing that behavior. Certainly, it is easier when we can anticipate what youth need in any given situation—

then we can help them get what they need in positive ways! When that doesn't work—and nothing ever does 100% of the time—we need to know some simple and respectful ways to intervene. The more ways we can master managing challenging behavioral situations, the greater the likelihood that we'll be successful with youth. Youth do not always see the reasons for certain rules. And because they frequently are living in the moment, young people may not anticipate unsafe or frightening consequences of their behavior.

Summary—Key Thoughts to Positive Learning and Discipline:

- Most youth have the potential to behave in an appropriate fashion.
- Make sure to pay attention to the good behaviors that youth are showing and give lots of praise. "Catching them being good" is a great way to reward positive behaviors.
- Set rules of behavior in advance, with involvement by the youth 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, so make sure that everyone is clear on the rules.
- 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. (Refer to *Learn by Doing + a Little More*.)
- Give kids choices in advance, and make sure they are aware of the consequences corresponding to behaviors.
- By making learning fun, and getting their input, youth will be motivated to behave in an acceptable way. (Refer to *Making Learning Fun*.)
- Before responding to what you perceive as a problem behavior, confirm to yourself that it really is a problem worth doing something about.
- Keep in mind that youth are not miniature adults and go through stages of development. Not all youth are capable of what you might want them 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.

- Use the least obtrusive discipline possible. Try the above suggestions to help keep small problems from getting bigger.
- If one approach doesn't work, try something else! Approach behavior challenges with creativity and humor.
- Be as patient as humanly possible!

References:

Diem, K. (2005). *Positive Discipline for Children*, 4-H Leader Training Series. Clemson University.

University of California 4-H. (2013). 4-H Project Leader's Digest, ANR#21729. Retrieved from: <http://4h.ucanr.edu/files/4462.pdf>.

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Positive discipline is the art of catching youth doing things right (and letting them know it).

Non-Verbal Strategies

Strategy	Description	Examples
Body language	Stay in control, appear calm.	Stay calm and unruffled to show them that bugging you is not worth the effort
Eye contact	Catch youth's eye, let him/her know you're watching (be mindful of cultural differences).	Making eye contact can invite a youth to pay attention to you. Use eye contact anytime you're trying to connect with a person.
Planned ignoring	Ignore some attention-seeking behavior that is otherwise not harmful, with the idea that youth will eventually reduce or stop if they don't get the reaction they are wanting.	Keep an eye on behavior while acting as though you're unaware. Delay your intervention until it is truly needed.
Proximity	Reduce the space between you and youth (i.e., get closer).	Sit with youth at meals, programs, and other activities.
Remove distracting objects	To avoid confrontation, keep distracting objects out of sight.	Check your environment before the youth get there. Put anything away that might distract them from the task at hand. Don't expect youth to ignore something attractive until you're ready to introduce it. If you're giving them cupcakes but want them to pay attention first, don't bring the cupcakes out until the lesson is finished.
Role modeling	Model and show behavior you want to see from the youth.	Show them the behavior you want them to display. For example: politely ask for food to be passed, listen when someone else makes announcements, and follow rules.
Signal interference	When another intervention might be as disruptive as the youth's inappropriate behavior (i.e., use a gesture to communicate the behavior you want).	Put your finger to lips to mean "quiet." Extend hand palm down to suggest settling down. Raise your arm. Clap your hands.

Verbal Strategies

Strategy	Description	Examples
Alert	Use five-minute warnings for transitions.	Five minutes before the program is about to change or youth need to be someplace new, give them a warning so that they know what to expect.
Attention	Pay attention to and reward positive behavior.	A compliment—one that you really mean—often stops an obnoxious youth in his/her tracks.
Humor	Defuse explosive situations by making a joke or saying something humorous.	Don't take yourself too seriously. Show youth that you can laugh at yourself, and make light of any offense that may have unintentionally been directed toward you. Your example will help youth lighten up too.
Open-ended questions	Show interest in youth by asking open-ended questions.	Ask open-ended questions beginning with "what" or "how" that can't be answered with a yes/no response. For example, avoid asking "Did you do that?" and instead ask "What happened?"
Redirect	Give misbehaving youth a positive task to do.	Assign a disruptive youth a job to keep them positively engaged and to give them an opportunity to receive praise.
Reflect	You can show acceptance and acknowledge feelings by reflecting back what you hear youth telling you.	Show you are really listening by paraphrasing what was said. "It sounds like you're discouraged about swim lessons."
Respect	Show respect by using "I" messages and direct information regarding behavior. Using the respectful message formula gives youth enough information that they know what they did was right and can do it again.	For example: "I feel _____ when _____, because _____. I'd like _____."