

BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

4-H Program Management Domain

Many techniques and concepts exist around how to manage youth behaviors. The most recent research states that building positive context and relationships with youth is crucial to working youth behavior and helping them succeed¹. Research shows that most behavior issues are alleviated if we create environments where youth are comfortable and engaged. However, a small percentage of youth will still need additional support to be successful².

In 4-H, the context is set in two ways. First, most state 4-H programs have a code of conduct that youth and parents should be familiar with and follow. Second, youth should help develop group guidelines and agreements.

It is essential to engage youth proactively. This includes involving youth in decision-making, building relationships with youth, and creating inclusive programming environments. One way to do this is by inviting youth to help develop group guidelines and agreements using **The Four Hs Plus One**.

The Four Hs Plus One

HEAD: Develop group guidelines that are well thought out as well as logical, reasonable, and possible. They should be easy to understand, written in simple language, and be non-debatable. Avoid using the words "never" and "always," as sometimes circumstances may make those words impossible to enforce.

HEART: Guidelines should reinforce caring, sharing, and collaboration and include how to resolve conflict. Developing the guidelines should be a shared responsibility—from creating rules with consequences to enforcing the guidelines.

HANDS: Youth learn when they do the work for the group. Create necessary guidelines that promote teamwork and responsibility within the group. Consequences should be developed at the same time the policies are designed. The consequences should be appropriate for the rule, and the result should encourage members to work together toward the group's goals.

HEALTH: Guidelines should promote good behavior and maintain each member's self-worth and respect. If consequences need to be enforced, the offender should not be humiliated or embarrassed publicly. Guidelines and rules should also keep members physically safe.

Consider an additional "H": A signal for "hush" will help the group focus on important matters when you or someone else needs their attention. This signal may be raising a hand (virtual or in-person), a flicker of the lights, a clap of the hands, or some other agreed-upon signal. The key is to use the signal and wait for the group to quiet.

Search Institute³ has a developmental relationships framework that volunteers

should remember as they develop guidelines with youth. Adults should express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities for youth.

Planning Ahead and Positive Behavior Techniques

Each volunteer brings their skills and experiences working with youth to their role. When dealing with behavior management, there are many ways that you can plan for and respond to situations to encourage collaboration within a group. A successful, cooperative group meeting is due significantly to proper planning⁴. This means planning for starting, transitions, endings, and differences in youth needs. It also means taking an interest in and using positive behaviors to build relationships with each youth.

Planning ensures a variety of opportunities for youth to participate and that they will know what to expect. This planning also helps reduce your anxiety level as a volunteer. Consider where you have the most disruption during your meeting. What might you do differently? For example, if youth do not want to sit down and be quiet, an active game is needed at the beginning of the meeting. If they come from another extracurricular activity or a school day, consider feeding them a snack at the beginning versus the end of your time together. Addressing the children's physical needs will help the meeting go smoother with less disruptive behavior.

Some tips to consider in your planning include:

- Carefully read, understand, and practice or think through giving directions for new activities.
- Select a couple of members to help you plan and set up your meeting.
- Have all materials on hand and ready to go.
- Set up the room appropriately.
- Allow enough time to complete each task.
- Set up the activities so each child can choose during some part of the activity.

No matter how much you plan, a member may not follow the guidelines or disrupt the learning somehow. Below are some methods that may be effective in managing disruptive behavior.

Disruptive behavior is an attempt to get needs met⁵. One may use numerous strategies to manage behavior and help youth get their needs met in more productive ways.

Most youth respond appropriately if the environment is set up correctly and the activities engage. Having a calm voice and these tools at your fingertips should help with most disruptive behavior. In many instances, a disruptive child is just seeking attention; you may need to ask an older teen or another leader to spend extra time with that child (e.g., sitting near the child, talking with the child, just being a particular champion to the child).

What works for one might not work for another. Therefore, it is essential to have several methods available to you. The University of Florida Extension⁶ has

developed non-verbal (Table 1) and verbal (Table 2) strategies for dealing with undesirable youth behavior.

Table 1: Non-Verbal Behavior Management 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.
Plan to ignore	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.

Table adapted from 4-H Volunteer Training Series: Positive Discipline for Youth⁶.



Table 2: Verbal Behavior Management Strategies

Strategy	Description	Examples
Alert	Use 5-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 their 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 to know what they did was right and that they can do it again.	For example: “I feel ___ when ___, because ___. I'd like ___.”

Table adapted from 4-H Volunteer Training Series: Positive Discipline for Youth⁶.

References

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