

Understanding Behavior

Oklahoma 4-H Volunteer Development Series



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The way group members interact depends on:

- How well the kids know each other
- The gender and age of the members
- Whether their group has a sense of purpose, works as a team and cooperates

THE INDIVIDUAL

4-H members come to us with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, interests and abilities. A volunteer's challenge will be determining how to manage an individual's needs and interests with those of the group (club/project group). Having an understanding of group dynamics, managing conflict, and understanding and dealing with behavior will assist in gaining and maintaining the interest of youth.



THE ROLE MODEL

As a volunteer your actions and behavior will be observed and sometimes imitated by the youth and adults being served. This is called "modeling" or learning by example. Children tend to imitate those who are admired and respected. Youth begin to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of these significant role models.

Because of this tendency it is important to set the standard and be a positive role model.

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT (PYD)

One of our objectives in 4-H is to prepare young people to meet the

challenges of childhood, adolescence and adulthood through a structured, progressive series of activities and experiences. We want youth to develop social, emotional, ethical, physical and cognitive knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors. PYD address the broader developmental advantages which all children and youth need (such as caring relationships, safe places and activities, good physical and mental health, marketable skills, and opportunities for service and civic

participation). (National Collaboration for Youth Members, March 1998)

PYD recognizes that being problem-free is not the same as being fully prepared. Effective programs are youth centered: staff and activities engage young people's diverse talents, skills, and interest, building on their strengths and involving them in planning and decision-making. Programs are also knowledge centered: building a range of life skills; activities show youth that "learning" is a reason to be involved because of the connection to a wide range of adult and peer mentors.

Youth development programs are also care-centered providing family-like environments where youth can feel safe and build trusting relationships. (National Collaboration for Youth Members, March 1998)

Learn more by viewing
4H.VOL.114

Youth Development

Understanding Group Dynamics

Groups, like human beings have a lifespan and progress through certain stages of development. These stages are defined in a variety of ways. One of the most common ways to describe group development stages is recognized by Levi (2001) as forming, storming, norming, and performing.

Forming - Forming is the initial stage where group members come together and begin to get to know one another. Few measurable accomplishments occur in this stage. Time needs to be spent defining goals and task responsibilities.

Storming - In the storming stage, group members are more familiar with one another. Conflict arises due to confusion over the roles and responsibilities of group members. Group members may be defensive, and sub-groups may form. Ultimately (and ideally) the conflict should serve to help group members clarify their goals.

Norming - When groups enter the norming stage, roles and responsibilities are more clearly defined, rules and relationships are established, and support increases.

Performing - Performing is the stage where the group is most mature. Members are comfortable with one another and are focused on their goals and tasks.

Members of a group come with various temperaments, life experiences and family dynamics. Based on many outside as well as internal influences each group will form differently. There are factors a volunteer can influence and take into consideration when establishing or managing group dynamics. Factors can include:

- How well the kids know each other;
- The gender and age of the members; and
- Whether the group has a sense of purpose, works as a team and cooperates.

The group will be in continual flux, ever changing. The volunteer is charged with continually assessing the group dynamics and providing the training and guidance needed for a healthy club/project group/team.

As the group is forming, the members may test boundaries to see what is

and isn't acceptable behavior. This is a natural and even a healthy way to learn how the group is expected to behave. How the volunteer responds at the beginning of the group cycle, will influence how the members behave under future circumstances. The members are learning "this volunteer cares about us and is fair," or "this volunteer lets us get away with anything."

A volunteer's role is to establish a safe environment where it is fun to learn, healthy to take risks, members/families are treated fairly and everyone has an opportunity to grow into their potential.

During the forming and storming stages members jockey for status and position. Unfortunately this includes who is "in and who is "out." Since our organization is centered around group (clubs, project groups, teams, etc.) it is our obligation to see that youth learn to be inclusive and flexible when considering the needs of the whole.

A perceptive volunteer will adjust activities and rules based on group dynamics. When changes are necessary, involve youth in the decision-making process. Groups who have been given ownership in establishing rules and guidelines tend to follow them with minimal supervision.



Understanding Conflict

Conflict does not necessarily mean aggression or fighting. Conflict is healthy, natural and expected when there are two or more people. Conflict can be positive, sparking creativity, innovation and change for the better. When handled *constructively* conflict teaches children valuable social



skills. Conflict provides an opportunity to develop problem-solving skills while learning to respect the thoughts and opinions of others.

Everyone experiences conflict occasionally, how it is handled is key to healthy relationships. Conflict occurs when people have different interests or incompatible wants and needs. Conflict is different than aggression.

Aggression is a poor way of dealing with conflict. Aggression tends to do physical or emotional harm. Physical aggression may include throwing, slamming, biting or hitting. Emotional harm could be exhibited through name-

calling, giving someone the cold-shoulder and exclusion.

Children possess limited skills for dealing with conflict because they are learning societies acceptable norms. Children are likely to express their negative emotions physically and nonverbally. As children mature they are more likely to use verbal criticism because they are learning to resolve conflict by talking and rationalizing.

Some children will have been exposed to good conflict resolution skills, while others will have had poor role models. Through group dynamics 4-H teaches them how to effectively handle conflict between individuals and within the group.

When handled correctly, conflict teaches children how to respect and resolve differences.

Resolving Conflict

Parents may need to be reminded from time to time our focus is Positive Youth Development (PYD). 4-H is a laboratory/classroom for learning to learn:

- Cooperation
- Conflict Resolution
- Communication
- Contributing to Group Efforts
- Character
- Managing Feelings
- Resiliency
- Problem-solving

Some children will absorb social skills for resolving conflict by watching a

perceptive volunteer at work. Others may need subtle guidance while other will require directed instruction for learning problem-solving skills. Youth need sensitive guidance from adults who have experience in dealing with conflict and getting along with others.

Age will influence behavior. What is acceptable for an 8 year old will not be appropriate for a 15 year old. Younger children will need assistance in learning to compromise and take

control of their emotions. There will be times when an adult may need to solve the problem for the 8 year old.

Older youth with more developed social skills need to be reminded or taught appropriate ways to resolve problems. This may be done by offering suggestions and/or allowing them to work through the solution.

"Age will influence behavior. What is acceptable for an 8 year old will not be appropriate for a 15 year old."

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When resolving conflict, a volunteer should exhibit these characteristics:

- be clear and calm,
- practice active listening,
- accept the person,
- support the individual not the action/behavior
- seek a realistic solution.

Answer to the following questions can be helpful in practicing and teaching problem-solving skills.

1. **What is the problem?**

Define the problem. Make sure everyone has a clear understanding. Don't assume that everyone has the same

understanding of the problem.

Does it deal with...

- Safety
- Health and wellness
- An emotional or social need
- Finances
- Programming
- ????

2. **What can be done about it?**

Think in terms of what do we have control or influence of? Brainstorm about possible solutions. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of each idea.

3. **What needs to be done to carry out this plan?**

Define the desired outcomes and who has to be on board. Identify the specific tasks that must be completed to resolve the problem. Consider the who by assigning tasks/expectations with clear and specific instructions.

4. **How is it going?**

Follow up with each individual and determine how the solution is working. If new problems surface or the plan is not working, re-assess and try a different approach.

Problem-solving is not a one-size fits all. Each situation is unique and is to be handled accordingly. Page 6 and 7 include tables with ideas on problem-solving



Using Discipline

Discipline is important to a child's development. Some methods are more effective others, while some are damaging.



t-centered discipline

ally benefits only the . If a child acts up, the rior is stopped because ritating to the adult, because the adult is cerned about the child others in the group. his discipline is used in i crisis, or when a volunteer is frustrated,

angry or doesn't know how to handle a situation. The adult may not explain the rules or expectations in advance but reacts according to his or her mood.

Youth-centered discipline

contributes to the healthy development of the individual. In this form of discipline the child comes first. An adult lets the group have some input on the rules and consequences. Everyone knows the rules

and expectations before the group members have an opportunity to act up. Youth-centered discipline requires a volunteer who is genuinely warm and concerned for the child's well being. The volunteer will use consequences to teach and model good behavior.

What to do about Children who Act Out

All children act up occasionally; it is a natural and a healthy way to learn about limits. Be patient as children learn acceptable behavior. We will all occasionally have challenging children/youth. An important distinction is to remember the young person is okay - the behavior is not.

There are usually reasons why kids misbehave. With patience, a perceptive volunteer may discover the reasons behind the behavior problem and even help to solve it. Remember patience...it takes time and even experimentation with various approaches to find a solution.

Reasons Why Children Act Out

Attention: Children want attention. Disrupting a meeting or activity not only gets personal attention from the adult but attention from other members of the group. Try giving the disruptive members some responsibilities during the meeting. This turns the negative into a positive as long as the action is not perceived as punitive.

Uncomfortable in the Situation: If someone feels uncomfortable, it may be because they don't know what is expected or how to participate in the group's activity. By misbehaving, the member doesn't have to figure out what is expected.

A few quiet words explaining what to do usually solves the problem. If that doesn't, a quiet talk while others are occupied may be more effective.

Afraid of Failure

Making sure that everyone knows how to perform his or her role or assignment reduces the fear of failure. The fear of failure can make members feel uncomfortable. It may be less embarrassing to be called a troublemaker than to be called a failure. Try to promote a team spirit in the group where no one ridicules a person who goofs.

Not Interested in What the Group is Doing:

There could be several reasons for lack of interest. The activity or project may be too easy or too difficult. It may be necessary to make changes in the activity so it is better suited to the members' abilities. Involving members in the decision and planning process helps assure that the activity is suited to the membership. If this has been done then you may need to visit with the disruptive member and explain that, while this may not be the most interesting activity for him/her, the group decided to do it and it is important to be a team player.

Underlying Disorder, Disability or Problem

Do not make the mistake of believing an individual is getting into trouble because he/she is a "bad kid" or rebellious. The young person may be responding in frustration from a disability/disorder/underlying problem. Having an awareness of certain needs/challenges will make managing these behaviors easier. It may even require a greater youth-adult ratio when the child is in attendance of meetings and activities.

"An important distinction is that you remember the young person is okay - the behavior is not."



The following strategies may be used individually or in a combination when problem-solving.

STRATEGY	IMPLEMENTATION	EXAMPLE
Negotiation	Children and adults listen to the others' points of view and discuss which position might be the best.	"I just think it would be best to have the clean-up project in the morning when it's still cool outside." "That is a good point, but we might have more people show up if we have it in the afternoon after everyone wakes up." "How many do you know will be able to make it that morning?"
COMPROMISE	Meeting halfway – both parties agree to sacrifice something in order to resolve the conflict.	"Give it here," Linda yelled, "you've had it forever and it's my turn." "No way – I just barely got it," Sarah snapped. The volunteer said, "Sarah, why don't you let Linda hold the puppy, and you can still pet it."
TAKING TURNS	Both parties get what they want by splitting the time evenly.	"I got here first," Dave screamed. "That's because you got a head start; it's not fair," replied Merrick. After a minute of wrestling. Dave decided, "Why don't I swing 30 times, and then you can swing 30 times?" "Okay, that sounds fair."
ACTIVE LISTENING	The group members or volunteer show that he or she understands the other person's wishes.	"You fouled me – it was obvious." "Yeah, right, whatever, I was just going for the ball." "You are such a baby." The volunteer walks over and suggests that they make sure each understands what the other person is trying to say. "So you are saying that I can't reach around your side like this without getting a foul?" "No, I mean..."
THREAT-FREE EXPLANATION	One person tells his or her position without attacking the other person. The young person tries to keep emotions from getting out of control.	"Come on Brandon, it's your turn to recite the oath." "I don't want to." "Why not?" "I just don't." "Nobody will make fun of you or anything. We've all messed up doing it." "Well, I don't really know it all the way, yet." "Oh, okay no big deal, I can go up there with you and help if you want." "Okay, that won't be so bad."
APOLOGIZING	Telling the person you are sorry. Not necessarily admitting that you were wrong, just showing that you care about the other person. This may help other strategies to work.	"I'm sorry we got into a fight. I'll try not to get so defensive next time. Tell me again why you didn't want to work on the boat this time..."
SOLICITING INTERVENTION	Asking someone who isn't involved in the conflict to help sort out the problem and come to a solution. (The intent is not to get the other person in trouble, but to have an adult help work it out.)	"I can't do it either," Mandy said, "because I wanted to go to the fair with Beth." "Well you have to because I'm going on a date." "No, you can't, it's your turn, honest." "Why don't we ask Ms. Jacobs what she thinks we ought to do. She is always fair." "Okay. Hey Ms. Jacobs, could you come here for a minute?" (Now would be a good time for the volunteer to offer some of the other strategies for them to resolve the conflict.)
POSTPONING	Taking a time out. Waiting until later to try to resolve the conflict. (This may help the kids or even volunteers to settle down and reflect on the problem without being so emotionally charged.)	"Please stop goofing around; you need to get these necklaces finished...Debbie, you are getting beads all over!" The volunteer realizes that he is beginning to feel agitated and is acting a little short with the children. "Okay, why don't we finish the necklaces next time. Anyone up for a game of 'steal the flag'?"
DISTRACTION	Helping kids to forget about the conflict by focusing their attention on some other interesting activity. (Especially useful for young kids with shorter attention spans, and when the conflict doesn't need a lot of discussion.)	"Tony, step back from the river, I don't want you falling in." "I'm not that close, it's no big deal." "Hey Tony, come look at this frog over here." "Wow, cool. Where?" "Right over here in these bushes."
HUMOR	Diffusing negative emotions by looking at the brighter side of the situation. It's amazing how quickly a mood can change with some humor.	"Come on Dina, you are so slow." "I'm hurrying. I've just got to finish this letter to my Mom." "I know, I'll ask my mom to send a horse in the mail – then you won't be bored." "A horse?" "Yeah, a big horse trotting into camp with a giant stamp on its forehead. It would be wrapped in a giant envelope, too." "Ha! Yeah, I'd like to see that in a letter!"
CHANCE	Flipping a coin or drawing straws.	"Heads, Katie gets to be team captain; tails, Seth gets to."
SHARING	Working together to meet the needs of both parties.	"I don't want to fight, so I want you to have the canoe. I'll go a little later today." "Really? You mean it? Thanks, I won't be gone too long."

Possible Problems and Solutions

Problem	Suggested Solutions
LACK OF PARTICIPATION	
Feeling of insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help younger members serve on committees to gain experience before giving them a big assignment. Provide a challenge in which the individual can succeed.
Lack of interest in the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote friendly, helpful group spirit where no one ridicules others' efforts. Involve members in planning programs and activities.
Lack of interest because a few dominate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a goal that "everyone participates."
No knowledge of how to participate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate and educate. Be sure members know how to perform the role or assignment they are being asked to do.
Unclear goals and objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make sure everyone has an opportunity to participate in planning and setting goals and objectives.
Irregular attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Try not to cancel an agreed-upon meeting date or time. Change meeting time and date to suit the needs of the group. Make everyone feel wanted, welcome, and accepted.
FAILURE TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY	
Members (or volunteers) may feel inadequate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Try to match assignments with abilities and provide training for the task.
Members (or volunteers) may have other things to do that are more important to them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help participants assess their commitment to the program. Explain the importance of the task(s).
Members (or leaders) don't carry through on assignments between meetings of the group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop public contracts (written, if necessary) clearly stating commitments and division of responsibilities. Give recognition and thanks for work done.
BEHAVIOR	
Individuals have not learned to distinguish between differences in ideas and differences between personalities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help members understand how differences in opinions can be discussed without attacking others personally. Accept members as they are. Don't make your approval and acceptance dependent on behavior.
Bickering, jealousies, and small group cliques are detrimental to individual and group goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on contributions and teamwork. Discuss problems with members. Review what they want from the project or group experience and what it takes to achieve their goals. Develop mutual understanding and trust between members and adults.
<i>Attention seeking</i> is expressed as, "I belong only when I am being noticed and served."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ignore misbehavior when possible. Give attention for positive behavior, especially when it's not being asked for. Focus on the ability to manage his/her life and make decisions. Don't anticipate failure. Focus on contributions and appreciation.
<i>Power struggles</i> are expressed as, "I belong only when I am in control or when I am proving no one can boss me."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Withdraw from conflict. Channel the young person's power constructively by appealing for help and enlisting cooperation. Struggling for power or giving in increases desire for power.
<i>Hurting others</i> is expressed as, "I belong only by hurting others, as I feel hurt. I cannot be loved or accepted."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid feelings of hurting yourself. Avoid punishment and retaliation. Build a trusting relationship. Convince the youth he/she is accepted. Let them know their worth. Recognize improvement and effort not just accomplishments.
<i>Displays of inadequacy</i> are expressed as, "I belong only by convincing others not to expect anything from me" or "I am helpless."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> End all criticism. Encourage any positive attempt, no matter how small. Focus on youths assets. Don't be hooked into pity. Don't give up.

References: Missouri Cooperative Extension, 4-H Volunteer Home Study, Lesson 4.
Sharing Resources for Project Leaders, Missouri Cooperative Extension Service, 1979.
 Farmland Industries' Leadership Series, "Problem of Groups"