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Facilitating Best Practices When Youth Aren't Displaying Their Best Behavior

Javiette Samuel

Tennessee State University Cooperative Extension Program, jsamuel1@tnstate.edu



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Facilitating Best Practices When Youth Aren't Displaying Their Best Behavior

Abstract

Behavior and discipline problems in schools and other settings serving youth continue to concern educators, counselors, parents, government, and law enforcement. This article highlights specific behavior management strategies that can be employed by a wide range of professionals who work with youth.

Javiette Samuel

Assistant Professor
Tennessee State University Cooperative Extension Program
Nashville, Tennessee
jsamuel1@tnstate.edu

Introduction

According to Guerino, Hurwitz, Noonan, and Kaffenberger (2006) roughly 46% of public schools reported taking some form of significant disciplinary measures during the 2003-04 school year. Nearly three out of four consequences were suspensions lasting 5 days or more, 5% were removals with no services, and 21% were transfers to specialized schools. Parents and teachers alike are concerned with these issues.

In 2004, Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research organization, conducted a national study to examine discipline problems in public schools. Seven hundred twenty-five middle and high schools and over 600 parents of middle and high schoolers were randomly sampled. Results indicated that 73% of parents and 85% of teachers reported that the school experience of the majority of students suffers because of a few habitual wrongdoers. Indeed, more than one in three teachers reported that they have seriously contemplated quitting or know a co-worker who is no longer in the profession because of unbearable discipline and behavior problems.

Behavior is a complex interaction of temperament, formal and informal education, cultural background, innate strengths and weaknesses, medical and health conditions, economic status, family history, and other variables. This is evident in youth who act appropriately and gain the life skills needed to develop into their fullest potential and those who need direction and require extra assistance to realize their capabilities.

In light of the recent tragedy at Virginia Polytechnic University and State University, the Columbine High School calamity (1999), and countless other violent occurrences committed by youth, professionals should not ignore such inappropriate behaviors as bullying, aggression, fighting, and threatening.

School Settings

Unless an individual is a certified teacher and has complete dominion over the educational setting, it may seem as if the intervention that can be taken is limited. The majority of youth-serving professionals working in a traditional classroom setting are not certified teachers, thus it can feel as though they do not have the authority to implement and enforce rules and apply consequences for inappropriate behavior. Indeed, countless 4-H professionals have reported feeling like the "powerless substitute teacher." To help eliminate and/or diminish these feelings, the following steps can be implemented. These recommendations are the result of over 15 years of professional experience with children and youth, 10 of which were in a therapeutic/clinical setting emphasizing

behavior modification.

- Establish and incorporate a working set of rules.
- Build rapport and a relationship with the teachers you are working with.
- Inform them of plans to use your own rules, and/or adapt existing class rules.
- Enforce rules when youth display inappropriate behavior.
- Inform the teacher of chronic problems.
- Use teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and others as allies.
- Encourage parents to attend sessions. If behavior is extremely problematic, require that a parent attend if he or she wants the child to participate

Camp

More inappropriate behavior may be observed at camp than any other time or setting. This could be due in part for the following reasons:

- The stay is more extended than a short-term club meeting or project group.
- Youth are eager to relax and release stored energy from school, home, and in sometimes work.
- This may be the first time that some young people have been away from home.
- Children taking medication for emotional, psychological or behavioral problems during the academic year may not take them in the summer.

As a preliminary step, encourage parents in newsletters, camp overview, orientation information, or other general materials to send medications if their child has a prescription drug that he or she routinely takes to help regulate their behavior and mood.

What to Do if Rules Are Not in Place

- Establish clear and reasonable rules in the beginning.
- Use age and developmentally appropriate language.
- When possible, involve youth in making the rules; this helps them take ownership and be more accountable for inappropriate behavior and with decision making and problem solving.
- Explain and discuss rationale for rules.
- Give examples of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate.
- When rules are broken, give a consequence.
- Apply consequences consistently.
- Give young people the opportunity to make limited choices.

Behaviors to Maximize Across Settings

- As the adult, model appropriate behavior.
- Help children understand consequences of actions.
- Use positive statements to correct disruptive behavior. You might say "You shared something now I need you to listen."
- To boost confidence employ encouraging statements such as "I knew you could do it."
- Recognize positive behavior with a nod, wink, high-five, or other outward acknowledgement.
- Encourage the performance of a less preferred behavior before the preferred one; you might say "You can go swimming after you clean the cabin."

Actions to Minimize in Various Contexts

To combat some of the issues outlined, avoid:

- Believing everything you hear about a youth from teachers, parents, or volunteers;
- Labeling youth as "good" or "bad";
- Embarrassing a child in front of peers;
- Disciplining based on past behaviors; and
- Penalizing because you are angry or frustrated.

Biases, Perceptions, & Intrapersonal Communication

Professionals should be cognizant of what and how they communicate. This includes mood, attitude, perceptions, body language, voice tone, volume, and pitch. Equally important are internal biases and perceptions such as stereotypes, misconceptions, generalizations, and prejudices. All of these factors can influence discipline, behavior management, and decision-making processes.

Conclusion

One of 4-H's primary roles is to provide intentional opportunities for young people to develop life skills. This skill set may be attitudinal, social, or behavioral. Most youth workers do not know a child's history, if he or she has had a Functional Behavior Assessment, and what the results are. It is important to report any behavior that appears chronic, extreme, or out of the ordinary. The average kid fairs well; others require intervention that is beyond the scope of Extension.

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