Dear Leader:

A wise teacher once observed, “If a child isn’t interested, you can’t teach him. If he is interested, you can’t keep him from learning.” Most 4-H leaders don’t think of themselves as teachers, but they are. Through volunteer leaders, 4-H members learn skills in their projects and other individual and group experiences that help develop such lifelong characteristics as positive self-esteem, sound decision-making, effective communication, responsibility, and cooperation. 4-H leaders can be especially successful teachers because they establish a personal relationship.

The child-centered approach

4-H uses a child-centered approach to learning. This means the program focuses on the needs and interests of the child. For example, when 4-H club members select their projects, they are more likely to choose projects that are of interest to them. They also set individual goals and make plans to reach those goals based on what they want to accomplish in the project.

You, as the 4-H leader, play an important role for your members. It’s through your guidance, understanding, encouragement, and recognition that they will learn how to set a goal and reach it. You can help each member set realistic goals. You can provide needed encouragement when the going is rough. Best of all, you see that proud smile that says, “I did it” when you recognize them for a job well done.

Hundreds of ways to say “very good”

People thrive in a climate of love, so give 4-H members plenty of praise, warmth and signs of caring. They need smiles and approval.

Look for good behavior that you want to strengthen and then say “very good.” Did you know that there are at least 100 ways to say “very good?” Here are some suggestions:

Now that’s what I call a fine job!
FANTASTIC!
I knew you could do it.
Keep it up!
GREAT!

Keep working on it,
You’re getting better.
Good for you!
WOW!
You are very good at that.
Nice going!
GREAT JOB!
Helping youngsters learn

As a leader you build on the natural curiosity that youngsters have. Since learning takes place through experience, your role is to provide opportunities for “hands-on” learning. Together, you and your 4-H members will have fun learning.

Each age group has unique characteristics and different developmental needs. Development level will have an impact on how each member learns. It is important for leaders to keep these differences in mind when working with various age groups. Of course, not all children develop at the same rate, but being aware of the general characteristics of youngsters at various stages will help you be more effective. Included in this letter is an insert titled Developmentally Speaking that briefly points out the levels of development children pass through and considerations for 4-H leaders. The publications Helping You Help Youth: Working with Boys and Girls (L90501d) and Leadership: Skills You Never Outgrow Leader's Guide (LC0631) are also both excellent sources for information on the characteristics of different age groups.

Leadership styles and how they affect your club

The atmosphere during your club’s meetings and activities will be greatly influenced by your leadership style. There are several different leadership styles, and no one style is the “right” one in all situations. Each style can be effective depending upon the circumstances, and a good leader will use different leadership styles when appropriate.

**Autocratic style.** When using the autocratic style of leadership the leader tends to make decisions for the club without the members’ involvement or input. The leader has complete authority and responsibility for the club. This style can be good during the beginning of a new club or with a club of young members who aren’t ready to make all the decisions. It can be very efficient. Things will get done, but it can be boring, and it isn't an effective way for members to learn decision-making or independence.

**Laissez-faire style.** In the laissez-faire leadership style the leader provides little guidance for the group and gives the members complete freedom and responsibility. Good as well as bad decisions, plans, and programs are permitted to develop. Members can learn a lot from their decisions, but it can be difficult for the group to reach a consensus. Strong clubs may get stronger under this type of leadership; weak clubs may fall apart.

**Democratic style.** Using the democratic leadership style, the leader encourages all the members to participate in planning and helps members develop the skills necessary to make decisions. This style is generally the most effective. It encourages interaction and helps the members learn self-confidence, leadership, and decision-making.

Techniques of a good leader

A good leader has many techniques that help establish group rapport. These techniques can facilitate the group’s activities and learning; others can hinder it. Your goal as a new leader is to develop techniques like those listed under the “facilitating” category below that will help your club members grow in self-confidence and learn leadership skills and independence. You can also check if any of the behaviors listed under the “not-so-facilitating” category are having a negative effect in your club.

**“Facilitating” techniques**
Guides group through an experience
Uses different leadership styles when appropriate
Keeps action going
Is flexible
Encourages participation by all
Is a good listener
Cares
“Not-so-facilitating” behaviors
Takes over leadership and directs others
Makes decisions for the group
Ignores suggestions
Creates a tense environment
Fails to prepare
Evades issues
Gives solutions rather than letting group members come to their own
Is concerned with “results” more than “people”

Teaching methods and tools

4-H encourages a “learn-by-doing” approach to teaching. The greatest degree of learning occurs in actual experience. The closer to real life a learning activity or experience is, the more effective it will be. Sometimes, though, it isn’t practical to learn from the actual experience. In that case, you want your members to have as meaningful an experience as possible.

There are a variety of methods that can be used to teach your members. This variety will help keep the members interested and enthused about the activities. Each method will also have an effect on how well they learn. The level of involvement is important in how much is learned. Activities that are more like real life experiences and that involve members in listening, seeing and doing usually bring about the most learning. Thus, when possible, use simulations, games, demonstrations or models. Try to avoid “telling” or asking members to read as primary teaching methods.

Some reasons why kids misbehave:
· They want attention. If they disrupt a meeting, they get not only your attention but attention from other members as well. Try giving the disruptive members some responsibilities during the meeting. This way, they get needed attention in a positive manner.
· They are uncomfortable in the situation. If members feel uncomfortable, it may be because they don't know what is expected of them or how to participate in the group's activity. By misbehaving, the members don't have to figure out what is expected. A few quiet words to explain what to do will probably solve the problem. If that doesn’t work, a quiet talk while others are occupied might clear the air.
· They are afraid of failure. Fear of failure can also 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.” Also, be sure that everyone knows how to perform his or her role or assignment.
· They don’t like or aren’t interested in what the group is doing. There could be several reasons for this. The activity or project may be too easy or too difficult. You may need to make changes in the activity so that it is better suited to your members’ abilities. If the activity is suited to the members and your programs were planned by group decision, then you may need to sit down with the disruptive member and explain that, while this may not be the most interesting activity for him or her, the group decided to do it, and it is important to be a team player. You can also make sure that this member has some responsibilities during the activity to make it more relevant.

What to do about kids who misbehave

Sometimes kids will misbehave. An important distinction to make is the youth is okay, the behavior is not. There are usually reasons why kids misbehave. With patience, a perceptive leader may discover the reasons behind the behavior problem and help solve it.

There can be many other reasons why kids misbehave. You, as the leader, need to try to identify the possible reasons and experiment with various approaches that will deal with the root causes of the behavior problems.
Evaluating your meetings and activities

An important aspect of leadership is evaluating your activity or meeting afterwards. Reflecting on the good and bad points will help you in planning future events.

If the meeting or activity went well, you should look at why it was good. Was it well-planned? Were all necessary supplies available? Did everyone participate? Did everyone appear to understand and to learn? Being able to answer yes to these questions and understanding why will aid in planning future activities.

If the activity or meeting went poorly, you will need to examine why. As much as possible, let the group be responsible for the outcome of their activities. Help them evaluate any problems. Was there a breakdown in planning or implementation? Did everyone participate? If not, why? If only one or two members seemed dissatisfied, you may need to address the issue with them individually. If the whole club seemed unenthused, you may need to re-examine your activities. You may also want to talk with other leaders or your Extension staff for ideas and inspirations.

Have fun, learn along with your club.

Your Unit Staff of University of Illinois Extension

How can I use the information in this letter?

1. New ideas to use in our club:

2. Other people who could help us and how they might help:

3. Questions to ask Extension staff and other leaders:

University of Illinois • U.S. Department of Agriculture • Local Extension Councils Cooperating

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