

## USEFUL APPROACHES TO BEHAVIOUR

Quite a few surveys suggest that one of the main things putting people off working with young people is a fear of awkward behaviour and doubts about their own abilities to handle it.

The truth is that behavioural disruptions will occur and there is no set formula for handling them. It's about experience, the individual situation, and what the youth worker feels comfortable with given his/ her personality and attributes.

BUT... there are some ground rules and there are some useful tips and tricks which can help people to build the confidence they need and find their feet.

This document has been adapted from an earlier document looking at behavioural problems in residential work. What follows is a brief look at how to prevent problems from arising, how to anticipate how they might start, and how to respond to them if they do arise.

In this document, we borrow a few tips and tricks from the teaching profession (who are light years ahead of youth work in this area).

### WHY MIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE MISBEHAVE? SOME SUGGESTIONS...

..mostly because  
they're..



SCARED

..or..



BORED..

- Because they are being pulled too far out of their comfort zone and they don't know how to handle it... and so messing about becomes a defence mechanism
- Because they have a certain status in the group which they feel a need to maintain
- Because others encourage them to
- Because it's too hard to resist
- Because something amuses them
- Because something happens that they feel they need to respond to
- Because they feel aggrieved by something and cannot find more appropriate ways to express their feelings
- Because they're bored with the activity and want to find ways to amuse themselves

## IN GENERAL...

Your aim is to help the young people to feel comfortable with their surroundings, to make the activities engaging and to establish a fair and consistent framework of rules *for the benefit of everybody*. When responding to problems you should be positive: **NEVER** show anger or contempt, but equally **NEVER** show fear or reluctance

## SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

**HOW WELCOME/ RELAXED DO WE MAKE THE YOUNG PEOPLE...** Both at the start of a programme and in each activity. Do we try to make them feel at home and relaxed? Do we explain everything in a clear and accessible way? Do we let them know (in varying ways) that we think of them as children of God, who we are pleased to have with us? Do they understand what is expected of them? And WHY?



**THE AREA YOU'RE USING...** Is it too hot/ cold/ uncomfortable? Are there things to mess about with? Are there distractions? Are the young people facing each other (not always a problem, but can be)? Is anyone hidden away from view?

Are people sitting near those who are likely to distract them? Are the members of the group who might be more likely to be distracted in the right place? i.e. near to staff and away from distractions.

If moving around is required, is this going to be easy or a pain? If young people need to collect things, are they accessible?

**CLEARLY DEFINED ROLES...** Who is responsible for handling disruptions during sessions? At what point they get involved? Are they appropriately prepared to do so? Do they realise how and when they need to do so? If they're not doing their job, how can we tackle it?



**INTERACTION...** Interacting with the young people during sessions (for instance, by asking questions or by letting them discuss things in pairs) can be brilliant, and it's a vital part of youth work. It can also lead to (or add to) disruptions though. So it's use needs to be considered carefully. For example, if you ask a few questions, and it's hard to recover their attention, is it worth asking the rest of the questions that are in your head?

**HANDLING DISRUPTIONS/ QUIETENING THEM DOWN IN SESSIONS...** There will always be times when you have to get a group to be quiet. There is no set formula, but some tactics work better than others.

The classic approach is *it's your own time you're wasting*. This involves finding subtle ways (don't actually say *it's your own time...*) of letting them know you are ready to begin and that they are missing out on something by not letting you carry on. Beginning your sentence and pausing can be effective. As can using certain excited body language.



If you have to be more direct, then remember to neither seem angry nor nervous.

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Rather, gradually become more assertive, remembering that we always work in COOPERATION with young people. Remind them that it's *their* activity. Remind them (if poss) that we all want to see what *they* are capable of. Remind them that *they* are delaying *each other*. Remind them that activities work so much better when *we* are all working *together*.



**OTHER FACTORS...** including, but not limited to: Is the activity balanced and fast-paced enough? Are the group passive for too long? Is the programme well balanced, with enough breaks and a balance of activities? Are the activities appropriate to the group? Are we using language appropriate to them?

**BREAK TIMES...** think about what there is for the young people to do during breaks. Are you in an area where they are likely to wander off? If they do wander off, are they likely to go anywhere that will get them into trouble? Is there anything tempting nearby like a shop, a take-away place, something to climb on, or people to disturb. If so, do you need extra rules or supervision at break times?

### **THREE GOLDEN RULES**

There are three cast-iron rules when you're talking about behaviour.

**RULE ONE:** The best way to solve behavioural problems is to anticipate them and solve them before they arise.

**RULE TWO:** NEVER say *we don't need to think about our approach to behaviour. It'll be alright!*

**RULE THREE:** The first time that a serious rule is broken is a key moment in any programme. How you deal with it sets the tone for much of what happens thereafter.

### **GOOD PREPARATION**

Behaviour isn't something that you first think about when problems arise. If you take that approach, you'll have real problems. Behaviour should factor into planning from the very early stages. So when you start to plan a programme or to set out your facilities, bear in mind the things mentioned above.

### **'DOING THE RULES' WITH YOUNG PEOPLE**

Going over rules and expectations should be part of the initial induction in the very first meeting with your group. This applies whether you are running a youth group, a residential, a retreat day, a chaplaincy group or any kind of project. If you work in a school or within a similar structure where there is already an understood structure of rules then this becomes slightly less necessary. Otherwise, though, it's a must.

You need to make clear that there are some rules, you need to make clear that they are there for a good reason and you need to make clear what those rules are. You need to do this clearly and seriously, but without coming across as too authoritarian or controlling and without breaking the all-important atmosphere of the event.

You might want to start off by making the point that nobody likes having too many rules, but that if the meeting/ youth group/ retreat is going to work, then there are certain things which everybody needs to agree on. Then explain each rule simply.

It is important that each rule is explain in a way which demonstrated how it is for everybody's good. The best approach is:

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### ***Can we agree that... so that we can...***

For instance:

- *Can we agree that* we don't interrupt each other, *so that we can* all feel like our views are valued and that others are interested in us.
- *Can we agree that* we all turn up to sessions/ meetings on time, *so that* none of us are kept waiting *and we all* know where everybody is.
- *Can we agree that* we are all settled in bed by 11pm *so that we can all* get a good rest and have a good day tomorrow.
- *Can we agree that* nobody goes outside of the boundaries during break times *so that we can all* be sure that everybody is safe and accounted for.
- *Can we agree that* we all eat our meals together and that we stay sat down until everybody has finished *so that we can all* share some time together as a community, and keep the place a little more tidy.

In this way, the group can take ownership of the rules and can see why they are necessary. Your group will hopefully see the rules as something working for them rather than against them.

### **GROUP CONTRACTING – A GOOD EXERCISE**

One possible way to approach the subject of rules is by using a 'group contract'. Don't worry though, this isn't as formal or legalistic as it sounds!

To do this, you'll need a large sheet of card pinned to a wall and a load of thick, coloured marker pens.

Start off by explaining to the young people that you need to agree together on some rules if the retreat/ youth group/ etc is going to work. Ask the young people to have a think and to suggest some rules. They might want to chat in pairs or in small groups first.

You can then invite young people to suggest rules and to come up and write the rules they come up with on the *contract*. The leaders will, of course, have some important rules in mind to add in if the young people don't come up with them! You will also want to put some very general rules in there (such as *respect each other and the place we are in*) as a sort of catch-all.

When you are happy with the rules that are on the contract, every single person in the group, including leaders, will sign it. The contract then stays on display throughout. It can also be a useful as something to refer to when rules are broken.

### **RESPONDING CORRECTLY WHEN RULES ARE BROKEN**

With proper planning and a good start problems will certainly be minimised. Sadly though, you can't stop them all together. You might get lucky and have a group/ weekend etc with no major problems. Chances are though, that you'll have at least a couple of occasions where you have to take somebody to one side for a quiet chat.

The first time that a major rule is broken is a very important point in any kind of programme. This is because when people are presented with a set of rules the first question that enters their mind is how strictly the rules are going to be enforced. The first time that a rule is seen to be broken is a key part in this

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process. If a strong response is given, then a strong message is sent. Conversely, if very little is done, then the rules take a serious body-blow! For this reason, the first time that a major rule is broken requires a strong and appropriate response.

It isn't worth responding to every little distraction that happens. Doing that just damages the atmosphere and the relationship with the young people. A blatant and deliberate breaking of a rule, however should never be ignored. This is especially true in the case of behaviour likely to affect a programme or damage equipment, rudeness to others, defiance of staff, or breaking of a clearly stated rule. Or indeed anything else of a serious nature.

Whenever a rule is broken, certain things need to happen:

- **The young person needs to be challenged.** This may be done in situ, or by taking him/ her to one side. Taking a young person out of a room sends a stronger message without looking over-disciplinary. It is also more likely to get a response from the individual, especially if that individual is likely to *play for the crowd*.
- **The problem needs to be explained.** What have they done? What rule has been broken? How does this negatively effect people? ... You might also want to explain how you or others feel about what has happened.
- **The young person needs to understand what will happen if any more rules are broken.** Have a look at the scale of sanctions below. Don't make this a threat, but merely a statement of how things have to be in order to ensure the smooth running of things.
- **The young person needs to be given a chance to respond.** Ask them if they understand what you are saying to them.
- **Any damage needs to be fixed. The individual responsible needs to understand that it is their responsibility to do this.** This sends a message that you can't just walk away from your mistakes. Apologies might need to be issued, rooms might need to be tidied, something might need to be paid for, or an object might need to be replaced.
- **Some restoration needs to take place.** Youth workers should work in a way that is *restorative*. In other words, once an issue has been tackled every effort should be made by everyone concerned to reintegrate the young person back into the group in a normalised way. The five points above are all part of this process. You may also want to thank the young person for listening and for responding well to what you are saying and to affirm them once they are back in the group and responding appropriately.

### **THE SCALE OF SANCTIONS**

As well as simply having a chat with an individual who has broken the rules, you might find it appropriate to apply some kind of sanction or punishment. The scale below is a suggestion of the sanctions you might like to apply. Of course, this will depend on the seriousness of the infraction and a whole host of other factors.

**First time...** a quiet word.

**Second time...** taken out of the room for a more in depth talking-to.

**Third time...** having a privilege slightly restricted.

**Fourth time...** calling the parents to have a word. (young people really don't like this!)

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**Fifth time...** the young person is sent home and perhaps banned from returning, at least for the next event.

A few things are worth saying about this scale. Firstly applying sanctions needs to be properly explained. You are not punishing them to *get them back* or to irritate them, but rather to help them to reflect on what they have done and to show them that decisions have consequences. Make sure they understand that and make sure that you are calm and polite throughout. It is a good idea to link the sanction to the offence. For instance, if the problem involved visiting a certain area, then banning them from that area will help the sanction to seem relevant and appropriate, rather than arbitrary.

Another point is regarding the fifth sanction mentioned above: the dreaded sending-home. Many youth workers are afraid to apply this final, ultimate sanction. Perhaps because it seems cruel, or perhaps because it causes hassle for the parents. In situations where other measures have proven unsuccessful, however, the red card should be strongly considered. Part of our job as youth workers involves inviting young people to reflect on their experiences. If other sanctions have proven ineffective, then being forced to leave the programme will encourage the young person to reflect on, and learn from, their behaviour in an effective way. In other words, the sending-home can be an effective educational tool. The ongoing damage that the individual is causing to the programme and to the stature of the rules is also a strong reason to wave the proverbial red card.

In many programmes there is an understanding that certain infractions incur an immediate sending-home. These may include drugs, sex, alcohol, assault or using equipment which is especially dangerous.

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