

## What Can You Do with Problem Kids?

"Hello, Mrs. Harris? This is Hal Renick, Jason's Scout leader. Jason got into a fight at the meeting again tonight. I've sent him home and, I'm sorry, but he's not welcome back at Scouts."

I've been a Scouter for the past 10 years and have never had to oust a Scout from the troop. Still, I know more than one group that has kicked out a member, and it happened to a number of boys when I was a youth member myself.

What do young people do to get themselves into this situation? What do leaders do or not do that forces them to make this kind of decision? This article tries to address some of the factors to help Scouters take more control of the outcome.

I believe that, more than anyone, young people want to do the right thing. As preschoolers, children want to please adults. After all, adults feed them, clothe them, and give them everything they need. More important, though, adults tell children when they are doing things the right (or wrong) way and, by doing so, help them construct their own self image.

As young children begin to interact with others their own age, they receive feedback that tells them whether what they are doing is acceptable and, ultimately, whether they are accepted.

With the two groups--significant adults and peers--as reference points, it is easy to see what motivates children to do some things. Into this picture comes the child's need to be independent. Sometimes children express their need for independence through non-compliant behaviour or rule-breaking, and this is when we most often notice it. More often, children find socially acceptable ways to express their individuality and independence--creativity, high achievement, hobbies, interests, and the like.

When young people start breaking rules, it is often a cue that they are not getting enough positive feedback from either their peers or the adults in their lives. We can hardly influence a youngster's interactions outside of Scouting, but we can have a great deal of influence within our own group.

If Scouts are not accepted by their peer group, they will tend to respond in a number of ways.

1. They will do things to annoy others so that they, at least, catch their attention. These youngsters end up being scapegoats for their peer group.
2. They will become the "disturber"--the one who breaks rules or causes disruptions to get attention. These youngsters end up doing the dirty work for their peer group.

3. They will remove themselves from their peer group to avoid negative interactions. These youngsters are on the fringes of the group, unaccepted and barely noticed.

Each of these young people needs help to fit in. Any one could easily become the Scout who is kicked out of the troop. There are, fortunately, a number of simple things Scouters can do to help young people with problems and, ultimately, all the youth members in their group.

1. Tell them what you expect from them. So often, we never lay down the ground rules. Instead, we simply expect young people to do the right things. If your members know what you want, they will have great opportunities for success.
2. Tell them when they are doing a good job. It can be as simple as "Your uniform looks smart tonight. I'm glad you remembered your beret this week" or "You did a fantastic job cooking for your patrol at camp last weekend."
3. Give them a chance to make their own plans. Give them time to plan outings and work on badges and provide the support they need to get things done.
4. Tell them you like them. Let them know you appreciate their talents.
5. Keep in touch with them. Watch for signs that any of your young members may not be feeling good about themselves. Ask them how they feel about the Scout group. It helps to nip problems in the bud.

All right, those are the things Scouters can do directly as significant adults in young members' lives. But how can you influence the peer group?

First, set an example yourself. Your young members want to be like you and, if they see you being positive and caring, they will tend to act the same way towards each other.

Second, emphasize the importance of each member in the group. Every person has skills that others may not have. Point out to your patrol leaders the individual talents of their patrol members. Emphasize the value of each member to the success of the patrol.

Finally, eliminate bullying. If you see bullying or bugging, stop it. Call a meeting of the young people involved and ask them if they realize what they are doing. Tolerance is simply the acceptance that everybody is different and nobody is perfect. Explain that intolerance is unacceptable because nobody has the right to hurt other people either physically or emotionally. Talk about the Scout law.

If you follow through on these steps, you will often catch and stop problems before they get out of hand. If things do go wrong, however, there is still a lot you can do.

Try to find out why your young members are acting out. Do they know what they are supposed to do? Are you giving them enough positive feedback for their good efforts?

Do they have a chance to be involved in planning and doing things with the group? What is their relationship with their peers in the patrol and within the troop?

Asking these questions will help you get to the root of the problem. Next, talk with the Scout about what he needs to do to get back on track. Tell him what you are going to do, then bring in his patrol leader as part of the problem-solving team. Keep a close eye on how things progress. Talk regularly with both the Scout and the patrol leader to give them positive feedback and keep in touch with their changing feelings.

Taking positive action will generally work much like preventive medicine to keep problems to a minimum. When they do occur, tracking them to their roots will help you solve them effectively. Unfortunately, there will always be situations where neither approach will work. Some of the young people we attract to Scouting come with problems bigger than we can deal with.

If a child has had a poor self-image for a long time, it will take a lot of work to change it. If a child has the habit of breaking rules to gain acceptance, he may be too disruptive an influence on the rest of the group. We may find we have no choice but to ask him to leave. After all, we're volunteer Scouters, not professional youth workers. But, before you reach such a point, try the positive alternatives. The young people you kick out may be the ones who need you the most.