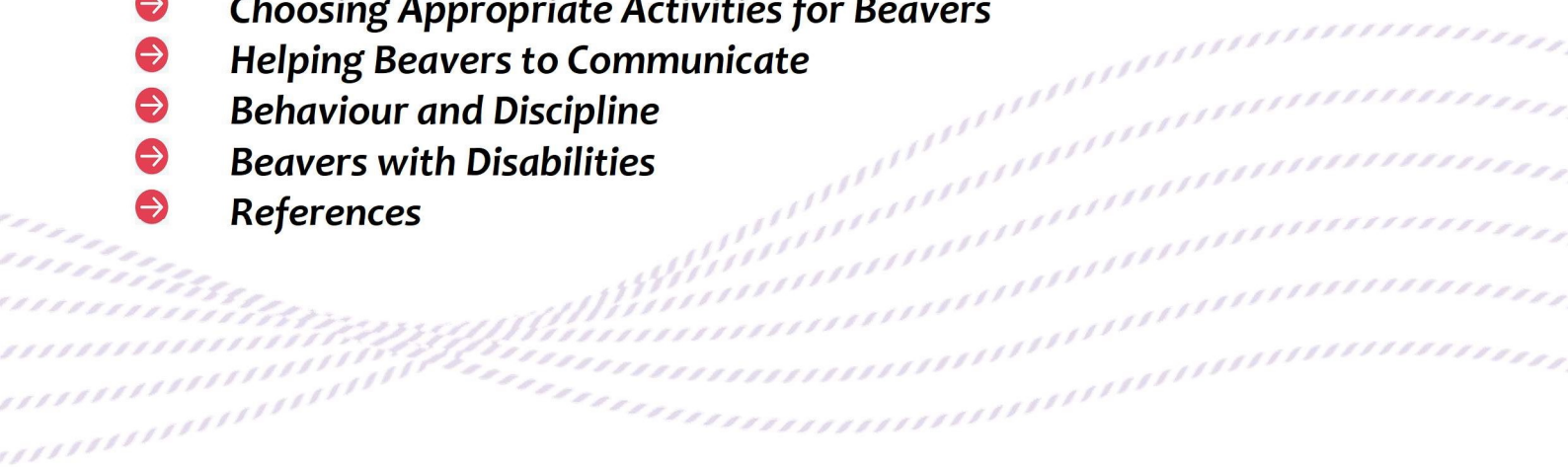

Chapter 5

UNDERSTANDING, COMMUNICATING AND WORKING WITH BEAVERS

- **Growth and Development Characteristics of Beavers**
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Growth and Development Characteristics of Beaver Scouts

Physical Growth

Between the ages of 5 to 7 children do not grow or develop at a constant speed. Instead, there will be periods of slow and steady growth followed by rapid growth spurts. As a result of this, a child whose movements were stable and comfortable may begin to feel awkward and uncoordinated.

The child's large muscles are stronger and more highly developed than their fine muscles, such as fingers. As children mature, their smaller bones and fine muscle control become more developed, giving them more precise coordination and dexterity.

The child's five senses are almost completely developed and are beginning to work together. This, together with their improving ability to handle objects, enables children to perceive and explore their world better.

At this age, children have high energy levels and are enthusiastic participants however they can tire easily and may not always be interested in completing a task.

Mental Growth

At this stage, children gather information through direct physical contact. They need and take great pleasure in handling objects: weighing, touching, turning, and placing them. They are extremely sensitive to shapes and colours and fascinated by motion.

Children at this age have a limited ability to concentrate and they need variety, change and movement from one activity to another. They also have a limited concept of time. They see everything in concrete terms. This means that making a fully fledged plan from start to finish is beyond the mental grasp of Beaver-aged children.

Their vocabulary is still expanding. Often, although they are clear about the meaning of their words, their listeners may not be. They have a strong desire to improve their language skills, and love to listen to stories, sing songs and recount activities. Despite the limited vocabulary they are still very inquisitive and ask "how" and "why" questions about their world.

It is at this stage that their perception of relationships begins to evolve. They start to understand cause and effect and realise that actions have consequences.

Up to the age of 10 to 12, children have not fully developed their values or moral reasoning. They look to adults for active examples of what is right and wrong. The children look up to their leader and is usually regarded as their role model, their hero. Children learn much by watching what you do and by repetition. You can help them develop good values through activities such as including the Beaver Promise and Motto into everything they do, by role modelling, by sharing, and treating all people equally and fairly.

Social Growth

At this age, children have a natural desire to play with friends. They are becoming less

self-centred and more interested in others. You can encourage them to share, take turns, and participate in Colony activities. However, they can also be impatient if they find they have to wait long. The leader has to ensure that they are doing something all the time.

Children of this age need ongoing recognition and reinforcement for their participation in activities. It is important to show them your appreciation or disapproval in a positive way. Such reinforcement often enables them to carry on with something that interests them.

Routines and structure are important to young children because they provide a clear beginning and end to activities and security through familiarity. Beavers need to know what is expected of them in simple language. They develop a healthy self-image through successfully completing routines.

Their emotions are very intense, visible and readily perceptible. Youngsters react to everything that goes on around them. Any disruption in their environment provokes an emotional response of one kind or another. Children are sensitive to their relationships with other people. They react at once to the quality of emotional, social or physical relationships. Both a warm welcome and indifference will affect them. Respect this fragile dimension in your Beavers.

Characteristics of Beaver Scouts

Although five to seven-year-olds share most of the age characteristics described in the profile, you will find subtle differences between one Beaver Scout and another. No child is the same as another. This makes sense when you consider that they have had varying degrees of exposure to school, Colony meetings, family life and other social situations. Here are some characteristics of the three groups of Beavers.

Everything is fresh and unique. These children are beginning to experience the world outside their family and close friends. Initially, they may be shy, unsure, and in awe of everything happening around them. Because Beaver Scouting and Scouting in general is new to them, it is important to give them clear, straight-forward directions using simple words for activities. They are learning to read and write; encourage their efforts and reassure them about their attempts.

Through school, family activities and (perhaps) final year in the Colony, these children have some previous experiences to build on. These Beavers still like using physical contact to gather information but are beginning to use their imagination in activities and projects. They may show willingness to take on more responsibility; support their initiative and let them help.

In two years of Beaver scouting these youngsters gain self-confidence; they are familiar with routines and activities. Their improved physical, mental and social abilities enable them to show their imagination and emerging personality.

Children need to know what is acceptable and what is not, although sometimes they need a set of guidelines to follow, the adult should always leave the children free to explore. One should never underestimate children's creativity and imagination.

Some Beavers may even be able to complete projects that stretch over several meetings. Such projects will stimulate their concentration, listening ability and budding sense of industry.

Needs of Beaver-Aged Children

If you are aware of the developmental characteristics of Beaver-aged children, you can help them grow by:

- Being at ease with them and letting them know you enjoy working with them. Make sure your body language reflects the message you wish to convey.
- Letting them make mistakes that cannot harm them and letting them know adults are not perfect.
- Expressing confidence in them through words and giving them opportunities to try out new things.
- Understanding that they are trying to achieve and support their efforts.
- Listening to them, their doubts and other feelings.
- Helping them develop decision-making skills appropriate to their age level. This can be achieved when participating in Log Chews.
- Dealing with them fairly and consistently.
- Finding a balance between helping them succeed when they need help but letting them struggle when they are making progress on their own.
- Behaving in a “mature” manner.
- Gearing your expectations of their behaviour to their capacity for that behaviour.
- Helping them feel strong within themselves so that they relate expectations about their own performance to themselves rather than others.
- Enabling them to meet real life emotionally charged situations and deal with them successfully with or without adult help.

Your Influence on Beaver Scouts

As a Leader, you play an especially important role in a Beaver Scout’s life. You are the source of praise and recognition – two things that help develop children’s self-esteem and self-image. Often, the child’s motivation to continue in an activity will depend on whether or not you tell them you appreciate what they are doing.

Age-appropriate activities are important not only to help Beavers develop specific skills, but also to enhance their overall feeling of self-worth. They trust that adults always know best. If your team plans an inappropriate activity and the Beavers are unable to do it, the children will not blame the activity, but themselves for failing to live up to your expectations.

Beaver Scouts may often see Leaders as role models, and may mimic your behaviour, attitudes and actions. Be a good role model for them !

Choosing Appropriate Activities for Beavers

- ➔ Consider the concrete nature of a Beaver-aged child's thinking. Beavers need to see, touch, hear, smell and even taste the activity. Doing is better than watching.
- ➔ Keep activities brief, but not rushed. Several short activities are preferable to one long programme.
- ➔ Because Beavers are very in-touch with their emotions, avoid introducing anything shocking.
- ➔ Choose warm and inviting activities that involve human relationships.
- ➔ Present activities gently. Show Beavers that they are important and that you are taking their feelings into consideration.
- ➔ Take time to listen to them (this can be easily done over Log Chews). Recognize and allow for any emotions or questions the Beaver Scout might have. Handle these with the utmost consideration and patience. Give the children time to express themselves before jumping into conclusions – emphasize that during such activities they have to listen to each other.
- ➔ Check activities to see if they satisfy the Beaver Scout Programme goals.

Helping Beaver Scouts to Communicate

Whether you are you are an adult or a child, a friendly, warm and understanding atmosphere is an important aid to communication. Consistency is also a key to successful communication. It is important for children to see adults behaving as adults.

Active listening skills are essential to good communication. Listen with full attention and respond to the feelings that lie behind the words. It is easy to tell if someone is really listening, because we can see it in a person's body posture. When children are talking to you, face them and try to position yourself at their level to increase the friendliness of the communication.

If you acknowledge the feelings you hear coming through, and couple your recognition with a caring attitude, you help children explore their own thoughts and feelings. In this way, you help them work towards developing their own solutions to problems. It cannot happen if you simply ask questions and give advice.

When children are upset, it is important not to deny their feelings and simply try to get

them back on track. Instead, try to give what they are feeling a name (e.g. “It seems that you are feeling hurt.”). This approach helps children understand their emotions.

Beware of long-winded explanations. If children are behaving badly, tell them in simple words what behaviour is expected of them and, if necessary, help them get started in a positive way.

Tips...

Be aware and creative when communicating with Beaver Scouts. Beavers cannot understand complicated messages or large unfamiliar words. They have relatively short attention spans; you will notice their attention starts to wander. When you approach communicating with Beavers, use a different tone and volume to convey a message and grab their attention. Do not just talk to them, allow them to experience something through their senses (e.g. taste, touch, smell).

If you have a visitor, ask them to get down to the Beaver’s level and talk to them one on one. Beavers sometimes have difficulty asking questions; it does not hurt to paraphrase their question to make sure you understand.

Behaviour and Discipline

Beaver Leaders always think about discipline. Without it, programmes dissolve into chaos, fun disappears, and sometimes people get hurt. The challenges you face include:

- how to establish and maintain a necessary degree of control,
- when and how to intervene in a difficult situation,
- and how to encourage acceptable behaviour in positive ways.

Sit down with the other Leaders in your team and fully discuss the areas of discipline and cooperation. Ask yourselves a number of questions. Establish a set of rules (not more than 6) and make sure these are displayed regularly at your Headquarters. The use of flashcards is also a good idea.

“What is Discipline?”

In short, discipline is self-control. It comes from much practise and experience – something Beavers are learning from family and exposure to school.

Helping children develop discipline is different from being a disciplinarian, just as having

authority is different from being an authoritarian. By using positive reinforcement rather than threats or force, you can let children know what you expect from them and encourage appropriate behaviour. **Be firm** means that you mean what you say and show it. Do not say things which you cannot do.

“What Behaviour Do We Expect From this Age Group?”

Keep in mind the age characteristics and limited experiences of five to seven-year-olds. Let Beavers know exactly what you expect of them, and make sure both they and you follow through on these expectations.

Routines are extremely important for young children. A timetable routine can be displayed in the room, showing what is going to happen. They offer security and a way of dealing with reality. For example, if you read a child a favourite story and skip a word, the child quickly points out your mistake. Children are not being picky here; it is just that you have altered their sense of the world, and they wish to make it right. Skipping an opening or closing ceremony or other Colony routines also creates confusion, and your Beavers may not be able to settle down again until you do the missed routine.

Children also need time to adjust from one routine to the next. If you suddenly rush Beavers, they may lose their sense of self-control and reality, and try to fight against whatever is causing the confusion. Because their power to verbalize or deal mentally with frustration is not well developed, they may resort to physical misbehaviour. This is how they blow off steam and try to regain control or draw attention to their problem. Although it may take you great effort and patience, try to stay calm and show that you really care by helping Beavers explain their concerns and find positive solutions.

Before moving on to the next activity, announce the change well in advance. This gives children time to clean up or complete the present activity, and to start mentally shifting to the next programme routine.

Simple rules help retain order. Beavers soon learn that their actions have consequences. If they are ignoring a rule and causing disruption, stop the Colony programme. Explain the proper routine, ensure they understand and will follow it, then begin the programme again.

“How Can We Influence Behaviour?”

A well planned programme gives a feeling of confidence to both Beavers and Leaders. Most experienced Leaders will tell you that discipline is more an attitude than a technique. When you feel in control of a situation, you convey this feeling to the Beavers. On the other hand, if you are unprepared or unsure of your role or abilities, you pass along these feelings. Confidence makes it easier to exercise authority.

The children ultimately set your programme time schedule. When a story is too long,

Beavers begin showing signs that it should end. Your adult sense of routine may say the story must be finished, but you need to learn to leave your routine behind when you notice early warning signs that Beavers are restless. Wiggling, staring into space, or fidgeting with a neighbour are cues to move on to the next activity.

Be flexible in your programming to accommodate the children's needs. It is a good idea to have an extra game handy or song to fill unexpected gaps of time left when an original activity does not go as expected.

As a Leadership team, discuss ways you can communicate better to improve shared Leadership. Cooperation (e.g. leaving things in order at Headquarters for the next section to carry out their meeting) helps build team spirit and confidence.

Encouragement, and positive words and actions send a strong message to your Beavers. Treat your Beavers with respect and praise them; both the group and individuals who are succeeding well. By highlighting examples of good behaviour, this reinforces what you expect.

Handling Disruptions

If your team finds a programme item meets with disruptive behaviour, change the pace. You can break into Lodges to talk about the matter, restate the rules, change to a different activity, or stop the proceeding and tell the Colony how you feel about what is happening. Keep rules and instructions short but clear.

Yelling is unpleasant, both for you and the Beavers. It is generally ineffective and unproductive. Instead, catch their attention with the Scout sign held up high, and wait for silence. Sometimes a Beaver simply does not want to conform. When you face inappropriate behaviour, use warnings sparingly, make sure they are a logical consequence to their behaviour, and always follow through.

Never embarrass or humiliate a Beaver, especially in front of the Colony. Quietly take the child aside to a public area and discuss the problem. A short time out from activities is not so much a punishment as an opportunity for both Beaver and Leaders to collect their emotions and make a fresh start.

Follow time-outs with encouragement. Let erring Beavers know that you only disapprove of the behaviour; you still care about them. In cases of serious or repeated misbehaviour, talk over the problem with both the child and parent/ guardian. When a child does not follow the rule, refer to the rule chart and explain that the action is not accepted.

Do not be afraid to put one hand up in the air, form your fingers into the Scout Sign, and say loud enough for Beavers to hear, "Beavers, I have my hand up". You can start by making a game of this similar to musical chairs. Allow them to dance or run around a little then put your hand up; they want to look for the hand signal to "STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN". When you notice that your Colony is starting to get unruly grab their attention with the Scout Sign. This is likely a clue that you need to change the pace of what

you are doing. An energetic game or a cool down game may be just what is needed.

Whenever possible, recognize group behaviour that is on the right track. Be your Colony's best **cheerLEADERS**. Your Beavers want your attention and approval. Be generous with it.

In Short

There are a number of simple things you can do to ensure Colony discipline:

Before Colony Meetings

- Take time to learn about age-appropriate programmes, and five to seven-year-old characteristics.
- Have back-up or fill-in activities for when Beavers get restless.
- Be well prepared so that you show confidence in what you are doing.

During Colony Meetings

- Set and explain rules and routines and follow them consistently.
- Use Lodges in your programmes.
- Set personal examples for Beavers to see.
- Give lots of notice when routines are about to change.
- Watch for warning signals that Beavers are losing interest and change activities then.
- Use praise to reinforce positive behaviour and establish good routines.
- Deal with problems calmly, quietly and without embarrassing the Beaver.

After Colony Meetings

- Talk with other Leaders about any concerns or ideas for improvements.
- Talk to parents about Colony expectations and to gain insight into their child's behaviour patterns or feelings.

Do not be afraid to talk to your Beavers about what is and is not appropriate behaviour. Have a discussion at their level to explore why respecting themselves, other Beavers and Leaders is important. Take time to discuss expectations and ask the Beavers how they would like to be treated, then work together to set those parameters.

Beavers with Disabilities

At some point, your Colony may be asked to register a child with a disability. The opportunity can be extremely rewarding both for the child and the Colony. It will also present challenges for programming and Leadership.

The best person to help you understand how a child with a disability can fit into your Colony is the child's parent/guardian. Talk with these people about the child's limitations and abilities so that, together, you can plan a team approach.

Other resources available to you may include the 'Kummissjoni Persuni B'Dizabilita' or any other agency geared to the child's specific disability. Whatever the child's disability, use a team approach to discuss all the options and potentials, gather information from knowledgeable individuals, and communicate openly, keeping the child's best interests at heart.

Child Abuse

As a Leader, you may meet a child whom you suspect is being abused physically, emotionally, sexually, or through neglect. What should you do? You have a legal responsibility to report the suspected abuse to the Group Scout Leader who in turn will discuss the matter with the Chief Commissioner. Confidentiality is of the utmost importance.

Never try to investigate or counsel yourself. These duties belong to professionals (for example: *Agenzija Appoġġ* or the Commissioner for Children) who can ensure the safety and well-being of the child. Your role is to provide support and share positive experiences with the child and all the other Beaver Scouts.

References

This chapter only briefly discusses the subject of understanding, communicating and working with children. You will find more information in the easy-to-read references below:

→ *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk,*
by Adele Farber and Elaine Mazlish

→ *Encouraging Children to Learn,*
by D. Dinkmeyer and R. Dreikurs

→ *Raising Kids Who Love to Learn,*
by Children's Television Workshop

→ *Miseducation and the Hurried Child,*
by David Elkind

→ *You might also wish to contact the Training Department and inquire about any short courses being offered on any of the topics mentioned above.*