**Making Good Boys Better**

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*By Cathleen Ann Steg*

**How do you make den discipline a source of pride, growth, and fun, instead of a cause of leader burnout? (Hint: The answer includes a beach towel, "Talking Feathers," and "Triangles of Valor."**

Nine Cub Scouts leap off their school bus and run to my house every Friday after school. (Yes, that's Friday, and are they ever ready to cut loose!)

The boys enter the living room, shrieking and laughing, and take off their shoes to avoid getting mud on the floor. The denners run an opening ceremony and help serve the snack.

One boy spills juice on the floor; instantly, and without my saying a word, all the den members scramble to get cleaning supplies and deal with the mess.

Following up on a bird-watching chart they'd started at the last meeting, each boy now tells an adventure he's had with birds during the week, while the other boys listen politely without interrupting.

Then we get our shoes and head for the yard, where the boys race against the clock for Wolf Arrow Point Elective 20. ("Run 45 meters in 11 seconds or less.") They cheer each other on, never mocking the slower boys.

**IT REALLY DOES HAPPEN**

This scenario may sound like den leader heaven, but it really does happen, week after week, with a group of boys whose cumulative energy level ranks with the top contenders. How can a den develop such exemplary discipline, and just what are those silly gimmicks mentioned above in the blurb for, anyway?

As a veteran den leader and den leader coach, I always give new leaders this advice: Be prepared ... to have fun.

**PLAN, PREPARE, AND PRE-TEST**

A well-planned meeting keeps the boys focused and happy. Make sure your materials are prepared in advance and that you have successfully pre-tested any craft ideas.

This includes small details. For example, for our bird-watching meeting, we listen to birdcalls on my Roger Tory Peterson tape. I'll have marked the spot in advance so the tape is set right where that red-bellied woodpecker makes his call.

If we need nine three-foot-long pieces of whipped rope for a knot-tying meeting, I make sure my den chief has prepared the rope before the boys arrive.

And, of course, don't forget the Scout leader's ever-relevant bit of advice: KISMIF ("keep it simple; make it fun"). It applies especially well here. If you spend half the meeting explaining how to do something, it's probably not worth doing.

Remember: The best hour-long den meetings (as any district training chairman will tell you) involve about one minute of leader explanation and 59 minutes of boy activity.

**CODES OF CONDUCT**

But no matter how thoroughly you plan your program, discipline issues still need to be addressed. Experienced leaders—and your indispensable *Cub Scout Leader Book,* agree that a den code of conduct can help instill self discipline in the boys.

Stan Pope, a former Webelos Scout den leader and now advancement chairman in the W. D. Boyce Council in Illinois, says he always had the boys develop their own code at an early meeting.

"I worked the flip chart and the boys made up the rules," Pope explains. And, he points out, though he helped them refine and clarify their code, the Webelos Scouts took it to heart because they had created it themselves.

Sue Wren, pack committee chairman and Tiger Cub coach in Pennsylvania's French Creek Council, used a similar system when she was a den leader. She emphasizes the need to stick to the code once it has been developed.

"I told the boys I would remind them once for untolerated behavior; the second time, their parents would be called to come and get them," Wren recalls. "I only had to do this twice in four years."

What's the most important element of den discipline? "You cannot issue idle threats," Wren insists. "You must really do what you say. If the boys figure out you won't call them on anything, the game is lost."

Dean Dillinger, roundtable commissioner, Cubmaster, and Webelos Scout den leader in the Longhorn Council, Fort Worth, uses "den doodles" to help reinforce the code. Each boy has a long leather thong on which he puts beads earned at each meeting: blue for uniform, red for attendance, yellow for bringing his book.

"I now also provide a 'good guy' bead to each Cub Scout attending a den meeting," Dillinger adds. "If a boy acts up during the meeting, he is asked to return the 'good guy' bead to the bead box."

**CLEARLY AND FRIENDLY**

What goes into these codes? Many dens base their specific list on the Cub Scout Promise and Law.

"The Cub Scout gives good will," for example, includes the concepts of being a good sport in games and in respecting each other as individuals. The den meeting is no place for foul language, discriminatory remarks about others' religious backgrounds or appearance, or mean-spirited behavior.

Leaders' needs should be addressed as well. If you have a 16-year-old family dog, you have the right to expect the boys in your den to treat her gently. If your den meeting room also houses a harpsichord, the boys should know not to touch the instrument unless you give permission.

By stating rules clearly and in a friendly manner at the beginning, you will find that most boys are quite willing to abide by the customs of the leader's house.

**AVOIDANCE IS A BETTER WAY**

Even after a code of conduct is established, the best way to deal with disciplining the boys is by being able to avoid the issue in the first place. Prevention, as is emphasized in the *Cub Scout Leader Book*'s Chapter 2 ("Boys"), is much easier than a cure.

For example, let's say you want the boys to remove their shoes when they enter your house.

Instead of yelling, "Take off your muddy shoes!," lay out a special "shoe-eating" beach towel at the first meeting, explaining that this towel needs to eat shoes during den meetings. At least one boy will remember when he sees the towel, and soon they'll all catch on—without a word of reminder from you.

To avoid having to shout, "Now calm down!" after the den has gotten too boisterous, try one of Scouting's many attention-grabbing gimmicks.

Andrea Fairbrother of the Shawnee Trails Council in Kentucky uses the classic "Minute Game" to calm her Webelos Scouts after a particularly exuberant activity.

The object is to try to guess exactly how long a minute is. Start the clock with everyone seated and ask each boy to stand up when he thinks a minute has passed. After about a minute and a quarter, tell the boys who was closest.

"The boys love this," Fairbrother reports. "They are so quiet during the game—and I've regained control of the meeting."

The "Talking Feather" is another popular way to keep down the decibel level at a meeting. If each boy needs to share his experiences with the den, whether it's his bird-watching report or the adventures of his summer vacation, bring a big red feather to the meeting. Whoever holds the feather gets to talk, and everyone else has to be completely silent.

The boys love to abide by this rule—and particularly like to catch the den leader speaking out of turn.

**CUB SCOUTS COME FIRST**

Den leaders can make a big difference in discipline by showing the boys that Cub Scouts come first.

Distractions can spell disaster in a meeting; let your telephone answering machine take messages for the hour and let the other parents know that, if they arrive early to pick up their sons, they should stay away from the meeting area unless they're planning to help the boys.

No matter how well intentioned a boy might be, he is unlikely to remain on task if he sees the leader chatting over a cup of coffee with other parents.

In addition, focusing your attention on each boy can improve the behavior of all the boys. Challenge the Cub Scouts with new skills but be available to work one-on-one to help each succeed.

Wendy Glasser of Saratoga, Calif., saw the benefits of individual attention in working with her large den of 12 second-year Webelos Scouts.

"I often broke them up into two groups of six each; when we did a project or game, this made for manageable numbers."

And, in order to ensure that no budding knot expert would have to wait more than a moment to have his bowline checked, Glasser enlisted the support of three parents at these meetings.

**REMEMBER WHY**

All right, so you've prepared a great program; the Cub Scouts understand the consequences of their actions; and you manage what little discipline is required with perfect calm.

The only other element is to remember why you run these meetings every week.

Personally, I do it for the fun of it.

Where else can a grown-up dress in a Roman centurion costume and make cardboard chariots to race at a pack meeting? Where else can you spend your afternoons sneaking up on toads, snakes, and lizards in a local park?

Good spirits are contagious; if the boys see the smile on your face, they're sure to join in. And if you're all having a good time, good behavior is guaranteed.

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| **TRIANGLES OF VALOR**  As part of the Knights of the Round Table theme with my first den, I developed the "Triangles of Valor" as an aid to self-discipline.  Each boy receives a poster board triangle with his name on it; the triangles are attached with yarn to the den flagpole.  For any infraction of our den code of conduct, a boy loses a corner of the triangle. If loses all three corners, he has to miss the next den meeting and can only return to the following meeting by bringing his parent along.  If, after starting fresh with a new triangle, he loses three corners again, he can no longer be a member of the den  In seven year, only once was a boy force to miss a meeting. And the parent who accompanied him to the next meeting was most supportive of the action.  **THINKING POSITIVE**  On the positive side, for any extraordinary instance of good behavior, the boy earns a stamp on his triangle. Three stamps allows him to order a prize of his choosing (from a treasure chest of simple games, puzzles books, craft items, etc.) to be present by me at the next den meeting.  Boy who clean up without being asked after someone else spills a drink or who eagerly helps another boy learn a new skill or who shows particular politeness and Scout-like behavior at an outing could all earn a stamp.  Does it work? Many years later, I'm still seeing results. The boys love the concept and discuss it eagerly with their parents. In fact, the current den is so attentive to their behavior that hardly anyone loses a corner anymore.  *—C.A.S.* |

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| **HELP!**  What if you've tried everything and still have a discipline problem? Consider the following:  If all the boys are misbehaving, ask your den leader coach to attend a meeting. It's extremely rare to have a whole den full of incorrigibles; ask an experienced Scouter to watch the den in action and suggest ways you could run the meeting a bit differently. Sometimes all you need is an objective observer to get the den back on track.  If one boy's behavior keeps causing trouble for the whole den, go to the parent without delay. Explain exactly what the boy has been doing and make sure the parent understands your expectations for change.  Sometimes the parent cannot, or will not, help to solve the problem. What's best for the boy? If his behavior is silly but his attitude is positive, you might try to keep working with him, hoping that the good influence of the rest of the den and the ideals of the Scouting program itself will effect change over time.  Give him positive reinforcement for every little bit of progress, using all the tips in the *Cub Scout Leader Book* section on "Discipline." But test yourself often: Are you able to keep calm and cheerful around this boy? Is the den meeting able to function smoothly with his behavior? Make sure the rest of the den is not jeopardized while you work to rein in one boy.  Finally, what's best for the den? Tell the boys at the very beginning that some actions will have immediate and final consequences; sometimes there is no second chance.  What if one boy hits another in anger? What if a boy steals something from another boy's backpack during the meeting? By keeping this boy in the den, you may well have no den at all in short order.  If the good boys in the den feel uncomfortable or unsafe because of the behavior of one boy, the good boys will leave. Contact the Cubmaster and your committee chairman right away and remove the boy from the den—at least until your district executive can advise your pack on the best course to follow.  One of the toughest things a den leader can do is make the decision to remove a boy, permanently, from the den. But remember: Each boy has an obligation to live up to the ideals of Scouting, and you have an obligation to ensure that those ideals are not compromised by the behavior of one boy.  Removing a serious offender from your den may even serve as a wake-up call to the boy and his parents; in the long run, your insistence on good behavior could help that boy get back on the right track.  *—C.A.S.* |