Chapter 6

UNDERSTANDING, COMMUNICATING AND WORKING WITH BEAVERS

Growth and Development Characteristics of Beavers  ▶  Characteristics of Brown, Blue and White Tail Beavers  ▶  Needs of Beaver-aged Children  ▶  Your Influence on Beavers  ▶  Choosing Appropriate Activities for Beavers  ▶  Helping Beavers to Communicate  ▶  Behaviour and Discipline  ▶  Beavers with Disabilities  ▶  References
GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF BEAVERS

Physical Growth
At this stage in life, a Beaver’s body does not grow at a fixed speed. Instead, there will be periods of slow and steady growth followed by rapid growth spurts. As a result, a Beaver whose movements were stable and comfortable may begin feeling awkward and uncoordinated.

Your Beavers’ 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 Beavers’ five senses are almost completely developed and are beginning to work together. This, with their improving ability to handle objects, enables children to perceive and explore their world better.

Beavers have high energy levels and are good starters. 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. Beavers need and take great pleasure in handling objects: weighing, touching, turning, and placing them. They are very sensitive to shapes and colours, and fascinated by motion.

Beavers have a limited ability to concentrate. They need variety, change and movement from one activity to another. They also have limited ability to project in time. They see everything in concrete terms. This means that planning is beyond the mental grasp of Beaver-aged children.

The vocabulary of Beavers is still expanding. Often, although they are clear about the meaning of their words, their listeners may not be. Beavers have a strong desire to improve their language skills, and love to listen to stories, sing songs and recount activities. Through language, children can ask “how” and “why” questions about their world.

It’s at this stage that their perception of relationships begins to evolve. They start to understand cause and effect, and realize that actions have consequences.

Up to age 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. Since Beavers learn much by watching what you do and repetition, you can help them develop good values through activities such as repeating the Beaver Promise and Law every week, role modelling, sharing, and treating all people equally and fairly.

Social Growth
Beavers have a natural desire to play with friends. They’re becoming less self-centred and more interested in others. You can encourage them to share, take turns, and participate in colony or lodge activities. But Beavers can also be impatient if they find they have to wait long.

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

Routines and structure are important to Beavers. 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.
Your Beavers’ 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.

Beavers are sensitive to their relations 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 of your Beavers.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF BROWN, BLUE AND WHITE TAIL BEAVERS**

Although five to seven-year-olds share most of the age characteristics described in the profile, you’ll find subtle differences in the three tail groups. 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.

**Brown Tails**

Everything is fresh and unique. These children are most likely entering kindergarten and beginning to experience the world outside their family and close friends. Initially, Brown Tails may be shy, unsure, and in awe of everything happening around them. Because Beavers is new to them, it’s important to give them clear, straight-forward directions using simple words for activities.

Brown Tails are learning to read and write; encourage their efforts and reassure them about their attempts.

**Blue Tails**

Through school, family activities and (perhaps) last year in Beavers, Blue Tails 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.

Blue Tails may show willingness to take on more responsibility; support their initiative and let them help.

**White Tails**

The last two years of school and Beavers have given these youngsters self-confidence; they’re familiar with routines and activities. Their improved physical, mental and social abilities enable them to show their imagination and emerging personality.

White Tails still need clear understandable instructions for activities, but now they can put more of their own personal touches on projects and will show initiative to do more things.

Older White Tails 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. They will also help prevent these Beavers from becoming bored with the program.

**NEEDS OF BEAVER-AGED CHILDREN**

If you’re aware of the developmental characteristics of Beaver-aged children, you can help Beavers grow by:

- Being at ease with them, and letting them know you enjoy working with them.
- Letting them make mistakes that can’t harm them, and letting them know adults aren’t perfect.
- Expressing confidence in them through words, and giving them chances to try new things.
Understanding that they are trying to achieve and supporting their efforts.
Listening to them, their doubts and other feelings.
Helping them develop decision-making skills appropriate to their age level.
Dealing with them fairly and consistently.
Helping them succeed when they need help, but letting them struggle when they’re making progress on their own.
Behaving as adults 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 emotionally-charged life situations, and deal with them successfully with or without adult help.

YOUR INFLUENCE ON BEAVERS

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

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

Beavers may often see leaders as role models, and may mimic your behaviour, attitudes and actions. Be a good adult role model for them.

CHOOSING APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES FOR BEAVERS

- Take into account 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 program.
- 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 you’re looking after their feelings.
- Build in time to listen. Recognize and allow for any emotions or questions the Beavers might have. Handle these with consideration and patience.
- Check activities to see if they satisfy the Beaver program goals.

HELPING BEAVERS TO COMMUNICATE

Whether you’re 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’s 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’s 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 intimacy 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 can’t happen if you simply ask questions and give advice.

When children are upset, it’s 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, express your feelings, tell them in simple words what behaviour you expect from them and, if necessary, help them get started in a positive way.

Hawkeye’s Tip:
Be aware and creative when communicating with Beavers. Beavers can’t understand complicated messages or large unfamiliar words. They have relatively short attention spans; you will notice their attention start to wander. When you approach communicating with Beavers, use a different tone and volume to convey a message and grab their attention. Don’t 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 doesn’t hurt to paraphrase their question to make sure you understand.

Here are some key words Beavers might use when trying to express their true feelings. Add your own to the list.

**Happy, Friendly, Peaceful:** cheerful, brotherly, glad, good, gentle, laughing, wonderful, nice, warmhearted.

**Playful, Confident, Interested:** brave, clever, excited, funny, smart, lively, thinking, interested, wondering.

**Angry, Hostile, Frustrated:** angry, boiling, cranky, cross, fierce, fighting, mad, mean, out-of-sorts, pushy, ready to explode.

**Afraid, Guilty, Worried:** put down, silly, sorry, wrong, afraid, frightened, trembling, worried, nervous, troubled.

**Lonely, Miserable:** alone, forgotten, lost, hurt, lousy, miserable, rotten, sore, troubled, unlucky.
BEHAVIOUR AND DISCIPLINE  
(See also Duty of Care in Chapter 2)

Beaver leaders always think about discipline. Without it, programs 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 your leadership team and fully discuss the areas of discipline and cooperation. Ask yourselves a number of questions.

“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 authoritarian. Using positive reinforcement rather than threats or force, you can let children know what you expect from them, and encourage appropriate behaviour.

“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.

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 program routine.

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

“How Can We Influence Behaviour?”
A well planned program 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’re 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 program 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 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’s a good idea to have handy an extra game or song to fill unexpected gaps of time left when an original activity doesn’t go as expected.

As a leadership team, discuss ways you can communicate better to improve shared leadership. Cooperation (e.g. leaving things in good condition for the next leader) helps build team spirit and confidence.

Encouragement, and positive words and actions sends 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 behavior, this reinforces what you expect.

HANDLING DISRUPTIONS

If your team finds a program 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, unpleasant for you and the Beavers, is generally ineffective and unproductive. Instead, catch attention with the Beaver sign, and wait for silence. Sometimes a Beaver simply does not want to conform. When you face inappropriate behaviour, use warnings sparingly, make sure they’re a logical consequence to the 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 or guardian. The leadership team may also wish to consult the group committee or Service Scouter for other options.

Don’t be afraid to put one hand up in the air, form your fingers into the Beaver sign, and say loud enough for Beavers to hear, “Beavers, I have my hand up”. You can start by making a game of this early in the year 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 rambunctious grab their attention with the Beaver
signal. This is likely a clue that you need to change the pace of what you are doing. A steam off 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 programs, 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’re doing.

**During Colony Meetings**
- Set and explain rules and routines, and follow them consistently.
- Use tail groups and lodges for programs.
- 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.

Don’t be afraid to talk to your Beavers about what is and is not appropriate behavior. 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.

One last tip. The Beaver program has a 5:1 child/leader ratio. A good way to remember this is God put five fingers on our hands – one finger for each Beaver to hold, while the other hand points the way.

**BEAVERS WITH DISABILITIES**

At some point, your colony may be asked to register a child with a disability. The opportunity can be very 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 or social worker. 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 Canadian National Institute for the Blind or any other agency geared to the child’s specific disability.
Your Scouts Canada council office can also provide information on how other colonies have integrated children with disabilities. Take time to visit these colonies and talk with their leadership teams. Some councils also have special service teams available to provide assistance and training.

Whatever the child’s disability, use a team approach to discuss all the options and potentials, gather information from knowledgeable adults, and communicate openly, keeping the child’s best interests at heart.

**CHILD ABUSE**
*(See Duty of Care in Chapter 2)*

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 police or child welfare authorities, who will assume responsibility and provide the best possible help for the child. Confidentiality is of the utmost importance.

Never try to investigate or counsel yourself. These duties belong to professionals 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 Beavers.

A useful book on this subject for both parents and leaders can be found on Scouts Canada’s website ([www.scouts.ca](http://www.scouts.ca)) under Resources. It’s called, *How to Protect Your Children From Child Abuse: A Parent’s Guide*.

**REFERENCES**

This chapter only briefly discusses the subject of understanding, communicating and working with children. You’ll 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.
- *Miseducation and the Hurried Child*, by David Elkind

**Notes**