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The Importance of Chaperones

No youth event can take place without adult chaperones, particularly when taking youth offsite, overnight, or on trips of longer duration. Parents are the most logical choice to be chaperones, but just because someone is a parent to a teen doesn't mean they have the necessary understanding or skillset to be a good chaperone for a large group of young people.

10 Tips for Youth Group Chaperones

Here is a list of the top 10 tips for parents to help them be the best chaperones they can be!

1. You are there to facilitate the group experience

All of your actions, words, and directions should be with this intent. While this is an experience in which both you and your child will participate, your emphasis must be on the group and not focused on your relationship with your child.

2. You need to follow the rules. All of them

If the speed limit is 55 miles an hour, do not exceed it when transporting other peoples' children. If no one is allowed to have food in their room, put your FiberOne bars in the kitchen. All of the rules - whether or not you agree with them - have been established to create a safe environment for participants. When young people witness you complaining about or flaunting the rules, it gives them tacit permission to do likewise - which creates mayhem for the group.

3. Get trained in youth protection and take it seriously

Take full advantage of whatever program your church utilizes to vet and train adult volunteers, whether or not you are required to do so. While these programs are referred to as “youth protection,” it is important to note that adults are also protected by knowing how to appropriately engage with young people individually and as a group.

Adults unfamiliar with group safety protocols might dismiss guidelines regarding two-deep leadership, adult to youth ratios, and other regulations as being unnecessary with

an “I can handle it” attitude. Youth protection guidelines are not established to test the limits of what *you* can “handle” but rather are designed to ensure everyone’s safety and to reduce your potential liability and that of your sponsoring organization.

4. Your child should not be at an advantage because you are present

Treat your child as you would any other youth participant. Do not allow your child access to you, adult spaces, or restricted items (electronic devices, snacks, etc.) that other youth participants do not have access to. Do not give your child permission to opt out of mandatory activities or allow them to voice disinterest or frustration to you during the event. If your child makes a request or has a complaint or concern, redirect them to other adults (or youth leaders) for answers and assistance.

5. Your child should not be at a *disadvantage* because you are present

Maintain a low profile as a parent. The goal of most youth-focused events is for young people to grow in personal and independent understanding of their own faith, through relationships with their peers. Give your child the space to engage with other young people and adults without your intervention.

Specific points:

- In group discussions, allow your child the freedom to speak without you clarifying or responding to what they say.
- When there are electives, allow your child to choose without your influence.
- When adults are assigned responsibility for groups of children, try to arrange so that your child is in another group to allow them the freedom to experience the activity in the same way that their parentless peers do.
- If you think your child needs to be redirected or reprimanded, first allow other adults to assess and address the situation.

6. Step up and step in

If the leader of the group does not provide clear direction about what is expected of you, ask. Do your best to fulfill the role they ask you to play, whether it’s to take charge of a particular task or merely be a reassuring background presence during an activity.

Throughout the course of the event, youth leaders will appreciate a sincere “Is there anything you need me to do?” Offer your assistance frequently, but also respect directions to step back, especially in activities in which youth are being asked to lead.

7. Stay put and be present

Although it's tempting to view a youth excursion as a retreat from your daily life, it is essential that you remain present and engaged with the group. Unless the group leader has specifically told you that you've got free time to nap, read, or check your email, be present and focused. During youth free time, ask the group leader what supervision is required and what the youth are permitted to do.

Free time for young people is not free time for chaperones, as unstructured youth activities often require additional adult oversight! If, for any reason, you must separate from the group or leave the group's location, make sure that the group leader is aware of your actions and can make provisions for other adults to assume your responsibility.

8. Be safe

Keep safety at the forefront of everything you do. If you have concerns, raise them privately and immediately with the group leader. Be diligent in collecting and maintaining permission forms and medical releases. Make sure you have copies of emergency contact information for any children assigned to you.

Provide your group leader with your own emergency contact information and information about any medical conditions, including a list of any medications you take. If you have privacy concerns, put this information in a sealed envelope with your name on it, only to be opened in the event of an emergency.

9. Be positive

Adults have more influence on young people than they often realize - especially when those young people are teens! If you positively engage in activities or provide positive encouragement to youth, the group will have a better experience. If you have questions or doubt the purpose of any activities, address it privately with the group leader, always with the intention of how you might make the group experience better.

10. Get to know the kids

This is the most important tip of all. Adult chaperones who sincerely engage with young people are blessed with the gift of seeing the world through exuberant young eyes, and they get to better know and understand their child's peer cohort. It can be exhausting and energizing, maddening and inspiring. But there is simply nothing else like immersing yourself, as an adult, into a group of young people.

One last suggestion: make sure to schedule a nap for when you get home!

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