

Supercharging Chaperones: A Meeting Toolkit for Maximizing Learning for Youth and Chaperones

Abstract

Trip and conference chaperones are a wonderful resource in youth development programs. These well-intended volunteers, many parents of youth participating in the event, want the best experience for the youth but are not necessarily trained in positive youth development. A consequence of this circumstance is that not all chaperones provide the best opportunities for youth learning. Providing a card-based resource kit that allows for flexibility supports chaperones in running event meetings that are fun and engaging and that improve learning of content and development of life skills.

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The Importance of Learning Content and Life Skills

Trips and conferences provide opportunities for youth to increase social emotional skills, or life skills, whereas in school, such opportunities are lacking (Astroth, 1996). However, because knowledge gain is the focus of a conference, the intentional development of life skills may not occur. With life skills as a goal of many youth organizations, conferences that include life skills-focused meetings better reach organizational goals. Child Trends, a nonpartisan research center designed to identify best practices founded in research, specified that quality youth programs "promote a sense of physical and emotional safety, enable youth to build positive relationships, allow youth a role in decisions, and support development of social skills" (Moore & Hamilton, 2010, Overview section). Furthermore, a metastudy by Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) indicated that by including life skills in programs, some of the many benefits to youth are improved interactions, decreased negative behaviors, and improved academic scores (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010).

Current State of Chaperoning Support

Many resources related to risk management and general responsibilities of chaperones exist; however, support for running a highly engaging meeting in which learning and life skills are improved is lacking. The resources that do exist ill-prepare chaperones, many of whom are untrained parents (Griffin & Symington, 1997; Parsons & Breise, 2000; Wood, 2010). An observation of 289 parent chaperones showed that many chaperones assume roles counter to the expectations of the trip planners (Wood, 2010). Also, chaperones engage in less discussion than trained staff members do (Burtnyk & Combs, 2005). Although there are issues, there are solutions. Some of these solutions involve providing more training to chaperones, including training on how to support youth learning (Fox, Hebert, Tassin, & Hebert, 2008; Parsons & Breise, 2000; Wood, 2010), how to develop life skills through social adult-youth interactions (Fogarty, Terry, Pracht, & Jordan, 2009; Paisley & Ferrari, 2005), and how to increase youth social interactions (Bechtel, 2002; Falk & Dierking, 2000). Another suggestion for improving youth outcomes from a conference is to include structure and tools for encouraging discussion during and after the trip (Kisiel, 2006; Parsons & Muhs, 1995). The common finding is that when more training and tools are provided to chaperones, a greater positive impact on youth learning results.

Supercharging Learning Through the Use of a Meeting Toolkit

This article discusses a card-based curriculum that supports chaperones in running event meetings. The primary purpose of the curriculum is to provide a structure for meetings that improve the knowledge and life skills learned by youth at conferences. The secondary purpose is to provide a tool for volunteers working with such youth.

The design of the chaperoning curriculum, or toolkit, was based on the 4-H targeted life skills model and the CASEL after-school programs (ASPs) research. The 4-H targeted model involves selecting a few life skills that support and match the content of an event (Hendricks, 1998). The CASEL metastudy resulted in the following finding:

The presence of four recommended practices associated with previously effective skill training moderated several program outcomes. These are SAFE: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. One important implication of current findings is that ASPs should contain components to foster the personal and social skills of youth because youth can benefit in multiple ways if these components are offered. (Durlak et al., 2010, Abstract)

The toolkit is intentional in its targeted approach and follows the SAFE acronym to maximize the positive results to youth. Providing strong support to volunteers helps them become more motivated and successful (Fox, Hebert, Martin, & Bairnsfather, 2009). The toolkit can be used as a template for developing unique sets of cards for specific trips.

Objectives

Youth Goals

To increase trip/conference knowledge gained

- To increase life skills development
- To increase the application of learning after the event

Chaperone Goals

- To improve volunteer adults' skills in working with youth at the event
- To provide a toolkit that can be used for other youth meetings after the trip

Features of the Cards and the Meeting Agenda

The curriculum provides a basic outline for engaging youth by using experiential education tools and techniques for pre-event activities, event meetings, and postevent activities. Three targeted life skills areas that relate to trips are addressed: personal safety, accepting differences, and marketable/job skills. Moreover, certain toolkit cards include blank areas for inserting other appropriate life skills to target. Activities have been selected that are simple, require few to no props and little to no space, and are engaging, as meetings may occur late at night. There are multiple cards to choose from, allowing chaperones to select cards on topics they feel comfortable addressing. Leading questions are provided, but the chaperone has flexibility to divert to and discuss needed topics as appropriate. (Example cards are shown in Figure 1.) The meeting agenda has six sections, each with associated activities:

1. Get-to-know-you activities are designed to build positive relationships among participants and help everyone learn names.
2. Compliments and appreciations support a positive culture.
3. Learning and support activities foster success by creating activities that support youth's discussing their learning.
4. Create/reinforce group agreement activities help promote youth's engaging in successful behaviors.
5. Business items address conference logistics.
6. Closing/reflection activities engage youth in discussing knowledge and life skills learning and how they will use what they have learned in the future.

Figure 1.
Example Cards

Compliments and Appreciations

What you may say: Part of our time together and teambuilding is to be aware of what we do for the group that helps us get along. This helps us have a great trip. One way to do that is share compliments of things you appreciated about the group. I'll start and then we can go around the circle. (Posting the sentences starters can help members participate.)

I appreciated that the group did _____

I appreciated that when _____ happened, the group

The group did _____ well.

Learning Support: Experiential Education discussion

Purpose: Having the discussion with you about the EE approach will help prepare youth for the experiential education reflect process.

What you may say: During the trip we will get the most of the day's experiences by talking about them. After we talk about experiences we will figure out what we have learned from them. Then the most important part is figuring out what we will do with that learning. This is personal as each of us are unique and can use our learning's in different ways. Even the chaperones will do this. The reflecting process is three simple steps. **What:** What questions help us remember the experiences of the day. By revisiting the day we will be able to answer the next question of what we learned from the day's experience.

So What: So what questions help us figure out what we learned?

Now what: Now what questions help us figure out how to use our learning's tomorrow or after the trip. It's all about our future success.

Create and Reinforce Group Agreement: The Circle

The group puts its goals, group, and individual, in a middle circle. What you might say: What are the goals of the trip? What will we learn and what life skills will we get better at? What will the results (Goals) be after the trip? The purpose of this fun trip is to use what we learn, content and life skills later. So what will happen after the trip is very important. Put the answers to these sentences in the middle circle. (Goals)
As a result of the trip we will be able to _____
As a result of the trip I will use my knowledge to _____
As a result of the trip I will use my improved life skills to _____

Now to have greater success with our goals we have to have a great experience here. What behaviors, individual, and group, if done well will help us? (Example: If we have "Good Communication" in the agreement it will help, if we use "Personal safety" skills it will be a good trip.) Now get 4-5 general behaviors, we can all agree on, a put them around the inner circle. The circles now remind us of what are goals are and how do we support reaching them. We will visit the agreement and goals throughout the trip to stay focused.

Closing/Reflection: Mental Picture Postcard

Purpose: This allows reflection on the day in a different format for learners who like drawing.

Tell them to invite group members to imagine a picture of themselves from one significant experience that occurred during the day. Where they practiced one of the life skills we are working on during the trip. Ask them to draw that image onto a postcard (or equal-size piece of paper/card stock). Ask what each member would write and to whom they would they send it to describe the situation. Optional: Mail/deliver the cards!

DEBRIEF IDEAS:

WHAT does your postcard show/say? WHAT doesn't it show?

SO WHAT does/doesn't your card show/say about the life skill(s) you practiced today?

NOW WHAT would can you do tomorrow to improve this life skill?

Guidance for Using a Meeting Toolkit

Providing the chaperoning toolkit cards, or an original set of activity cards, equips volunteers who are at various skill levels with helpful, practical tools. The following guidance can lead to success for volunteers and youth using such tools:

- The goals for life skills development and knowledge to be learned on a trip, the meetings' roles in these goals, and the objective of using learning after the trip must be clearly known to volunteers and youth. Ideally, the youth cocreate the goals with staff and the volunteer.
- The volunteer plans the meetings and selects activity cards before the trip. However, it is appropriate for a volunteer to modify a plan once on the trip, if needed.
- Volunteers can model improvement by sharing their life skills and knowledge learning.
- Rephrasing questions can help some youth process questions more effectively.
- Consistently following the format of "what, so what, and now what" helps youth develop processing fluency.
- The idea is to have fun.
- The use of learning after an event is greatly improved if youth create goals before the event regarding how they will use their learning for themselves, their group, their community, or their world.

- A follow-up event or phone call supports the youth in applying their learning and offers an opportunity to evaluate the impacts of the event.

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