

Tips for Youth Program Administrators

As you get ready to plan your youth program, here are some tips gathered from other youth program administrators that you might find useful:

Plan For Fun

Adequate planning can make the difference between a youth program where the participants learned something, and one where they had fun learning something. When *fun* is built into a youth program, participants tend to learn more, pay attention better, return in future years, and spread the word about your program to their friends and family. Fun doesn't just happen because of the topic of your program, though. It has to be designed into the program, even a program that we might already think would be fun (like a sports camp).

Provide Adequate Time

The schedule for the program should provide the participants with enough time to accomplish the objectives and have something they can be proud of at the end. For example, building a model rocket can be a lot of fun, but if participants don't have enough time to finish their project and they go home with only a half-built rocket that has never been launched, they won't have had much fun.

Don't Have Too Much Downtime

Program participants will have different skill sets and abilities, and those who catch on quickly can end up standing/sitting around a lot while waiting for others. Here are some ways you might be able to handle this challenge:

- Team up participants with others of similar ability
- Identify the participants who are faster as “mentors” within each team to help others
- Have additional things the fast-finishers can do, either by making their project more complex or as a reward for finishing

Variety

Not all participants will enjoy doing the same things. Even activities like watching a popular movie might not appeal to some participants. It is alright if you don't have 100% agreement for participants on an activity, as long as there is enough variety so that each participant is able to have fun the majority of the time. One of the strategies that some program leaders have used is to challenge the participants to come up with their own schedule and activities for “fun time” using some leader-provided guidelines that help ensure program objectives are still met. For example, a STEM program might challenge participants to come up with a new “sport” that can be played in a low-gravity environment like the inside of a space station, and then participants can have a chance to try out their game inside a bounce-house toward the end of the program. The participants might have to come up with the objective, the scoring system, and the rules of

play. Using things like a beach ball (available in a variety of sizes) can help mimic how a thrown object might act in such an environment.

Let Participants Decide On Activities

If your program can handle it, sometimes allowing the participants to decide what order things will take place, and how much time will be spent on each, will help them stay engaged and give buy-in to the decisions. It might not be significant, but they feel included. For example, there might be 3 hours total available for 3 different activities that normally would be 1 hour each. The students might be allowed to allocate 15 minutes from one or two of the activities to the one they want to spend more time doing, so that perhaps two activities are done for 45 minutes each, and the third is done for 90 minutes. The objectives of the program are thus met by having all three activities accomplished (and students can be reminded in the shortened ones that they need to keep things moving to get everything done in a shorter period of time), while students get extra time on the one they identified.

Do you have tips you can share with future program leaders on how to make things fun? If so, please submit them to _____ for inclusion in future publications and training sessions.

Prepare Your Staff for Safety

Another key function you have as the leader of the youth program is to ensure your staff is ready and prepared to carry out their duties. They obviously will need to know their material, and they will need to gather the necessary resources to accomplish their tasks. In addition, they will need to recognize that they are the front-line for safety associated with your program. The following are some commonly used approaches to ensuring safety at youth programs:

Safety training for staff

Taking time during staff training to talk about safety helps ensure everyone knows what to do if incidents arise, and it reinforces the importance of safety. Challenge the staff to identify potential safety issues that might arise during the planned activities, along with ways to minimize safety risks.

Prior-to-arrival walk-through

At least 30 minutes before the youth participants will arrive, have designated program staff do a walk-through of all areas that will be used to ensure there are no safety hazards. Look for the obvious, like cleaning chemicals left out or an extension cord laying across an aisle, as well for the not-so-obvious, like a back door that has been propped open and could allow an unauthorized person access to the participants. In addition, make sure all emergency exit routes are unobstructed.

Safety specific to your activities

Many youth programs will have potential hazards that can be safely managed. For example, programs where there is a lot of physical activity should be prepared to keep participants hydrated, and deal with injuries like sprains and strains. Those working with hot objects, like hot-melt glue guns or heating plates, should ensure participants are properly supervised, are not engaging in horse play, and are using appropriate safety equipment. Program participants should

be given safety training for all activities where there is an identified hazard, as well as general safety training for the overall program. They should know how to report a hazard they observe (such as, immediately notify the team leader), and what to do until it has been addressed (like stay away and warn others). For those who are outdoors during all or part of the activities, participants should have sunscreen, adequate shade during rest times, and water to drink. In addition, there should be one or more of the staff designated and trained in weather monitoring to ensure there are no hazards (e.g., high winds, lightning, hail, etc.) that creep up on the participants. In these cases, a sheltering plan should be in place so everyone knows what to do if the weather turns dangerous.

Did You Know?

When there is lightning, there is thunder. Most people in the US grew up learning to estimate the distance of the lightning by counting the seconds between a flash of lightning and when the thunder is heard. Unfortunately, most were taught that each second of delay means 1 mile of distance from the lightning. This is incorrect, as it takes just over 5 seconds for the sound to travel 1 mile. That is a big difference, since a 10-second count means the lightning is only about 2 miles away, not 10, especially when a single lightning strike can be several miles long. Basically, if you can hear thunder, it is time to stop the outdoor activities and get to safety inside. For youth programs during the summer and early fall, lightning safety needs to be part of your overall safety plan, though it can be part of any youth program safety plan, since it can occur at any time of the year. Learn more about preparing for lightning and other weather hazards at: www.weather.gov/safety/

Overnight Programs/Camps

Besides the logistics of handling meals and sleeping space, there are a few things to keep in mind if your youth program will be housing participants overnight.

On-duty staff

While the formal program activities may be over, there needs to be at least one person (and preferably two so there is no potential for “one-on-one” contact) on duty and patrolling the sleeping area throughout the night. This applies whether the participants are sleeping in tents or in dormitories. The on-duty staff are responsible for ensuring the participants stay in their assigned quarters and don’t take off, and for ensuring no hazards come up during the night (including animals, fire, criminals, etc.). If it is known that a participant is the subject of a custody battle by parents, the on-duty overnight staff should be particularly alert to the non-custodial parent trying to access the child.

Rules for participants

The participants should know what they can and cannot do, and what the rules are during the night. This includes what “lights out” means, and whether they are allowed to use personal electronic devices after that time. There should be clear rules on when they can leave their sleeping quarters, and how they can report issues to the on-duty overnight staff.

Parental contact

Parents often worry if they haven't heard from their child in what they think is a reasonable period of time. Often, this is because they assume things at the program are scheduled just like they are at home. They might not realize that the program might have activities scheduled well into the evening. Make sure parents realize what time the scheduled activities end, and when they might stand a reasonable chance of reaching their child to check in with each other. It also might be a good idea to have a pre-designated time for participants to call or text their parents, since they will hopefully be having so much fun in your program that they aren't thinking at all about home. This might be as simple as making the statement at the end of the last formal event of the evening, asking participants to take out their cell phones and send a message home. Some programs have even found it helpful to create an "invitation only" social media page for parents and post the daily schedule, along with photos of each participant having fun in various activities, as a way to relieve parental anxiety and give them something to talk about with their child each evening.

Emergency contacts within the program

Just as it is hard for parents to know what is happening within the program, it is also sometimes difficult for program staff to know what is happening back at a participant's home. Emergencies can happen there, too, which might necessitate getting ahold of the program staff immediately. This includes death or injury to a family member, natural disasters nearby, and pet emergencies that might impact the program participant. Parents should be provided a way they can reach camp staff at any time of the day or night should something tragic happen back home. It is typically rare, but it does happen on occasion.