

Hints on Group Management

For School Ages

Set out expectations at the very start. Be sure to introduce yourself— “My name is Susan, I’m a Master Naturalist and I’ll be your teacher for this activity.” It’s important to establish yourself as the authority figure for that activity before you get started.

Remind school groups that they still need to follow school rules on the field trip. Ask what their “quiet signal” is at school and then use that signal when you need to get their attention.

Don’t use “baby talk” with younger kids—talk in your normal voice, but just use simpler terms and easy-to-understand language.



Don’t make assumptions about student’s backgrounds or abilities. Groups come from all backgrounds and walks of life. They have varied home situations. Also don’t assume that everybody has a typical house and typical kid things. Not everybody has an iPad. Try to use universal language like “family” versus “mom and dad.”

When younger children interrupt your presentation with excited stories, be patient and listen with a smile for a minute or two, then find a way to move on— ‘that is so fun; now let’s see what else I have to show you!’ If too many kids are trying to tell stories ask them to wait until a better time, like when you are walking on the trail or when the program is over.

Don’t give them so many rules that they can’t remember them. Limit yourself to three or four important rules.

Model positive behavior and be fair. Try complimenting children on good behavior— “I like the way Johnny raised his hand to answer the question”. Use positive reinforcement “You are all doing a great job of listening right now.”

For longer excursions (all day) have the students help you develop the rules. Come up with three or four rules that everyone agrees on. If they need help, try some leading questions like, “What do we need to do to be safe? How can we make sure that everyone gets included?”

If you are having trouble with a group, you can let them know that there are some consequences to their actions such as sitting out the activity or going back to the bus with an adult. Be sure to let them know how you will be deciding who will be disciplined— “If you can’t stop throwing rocks, we will stop this activity and do something else. The next time I see a rock thrown, we will move on.”

With younger students (2nd grade and younger), games and distraction are very helpful. If the kids are talking over you, try being silent for a few minutes or try talking very softly. This will ignite their curiosity and they will want to quiet down so that they can hear what you are saying. Games are also very helpful. If you have trouble moving kids along the trail you can try playing “follow the leader.” If you need help picking up supplies, make it a game— “Who can pick up the most items and bring them back to me?”

Use boisterous or troublesome students to help. Channel their energy to something positive.

Separate the behavior from the child— “Your talking is disturbing the class” rather than “Johnny, you are disturbing the class.”

Involve the parents. Get to know their names right way so that you can call on them-- “Mary, would you mind helping Johnny find his quiet voice?”

You can start with a game or something active. Remember that most of these kids are just excited to be outdoors. They also may be in a natural area for the first time. Don’t expect your students to be able to sit for very long.

When you are going to do an activity, remember to state the boundaries and rules— “When I say ‘go’ you are going to run around and look for three plants that have different colored flowers. You may go from this hill to that trail and then from me to that tree over there.”

Make sure that you are having fun! Enthusiasm is contagious.

Don’t expect perfection. Kids are in the process of learning to behave.

For Adults

Always arrive early at the meeting place- we recommend about 30 minutes early. Remain there and don't walk around as you will only confuse visitors planning to go on the field trip. When people arrive at the meeting place, they expect to see the leader. If you do not stay at this location, many people may be uncertain as to whether they are at the correct place.

Greet people as they arrive- don't let them just stand there. Introduce yourself. The group needs to know who you are. Engage early comers in conversation, developing rapport with the group while waiting for everyone to show up. This helps make them a part of the group and helps to get each person acquainted with others on the tour. It also helps you personalize your message to people based on their backgrounds and experiences.



Start the field trip on time. Don't wait around too long for possible late comers. People who arrived early or on time have made an effort to do so and should not have to wait for those less punctual.

Let people know what to expect ahead of time so they can dress appropriately and bring proper equipment. Identify any special activities they will be engaged in during the tour. State the distance to be covered, the time required, and any basic needs- like bathrooms. Let them know the route and where the walk is to end. List some highlights and the objective of the field trip. Invite people to ask questions during the walk.

Don't make assumptions about the participant's backgrounds, abilities, or preferences. If you have a question about language someone is using, ask! Be open to feedback from your participants.

Safety is paramount. You are required to give a short safety talk. Inform the group of special conditions, such as rough terrain, wet ground, flowing water, possible presence of ticks, poisonous plants, rattlesnakes, lightning, other users, etc.

Pay attention to your positioning with the group. It's better for you to face in the direction of the sun than have you and the audience facing the sun and squinting. Avoid wearing reflective sunglasses. Face the crowd, not what you are talking about.

Many people have a profound fear of snakes. If you are in rattlesnake habitat, tell people ahead of time. Inform them about the natural history of rattlesnakes, and appropriate behavior to avoid snakes and how to be aware of them.

Conversely, exposure only to domesticated animals may leave people without appropriate respect for wild animals. Your presentation cannot totally undo fears, but your attitude will affect your audience.

Begin the walk leisurely, moving only a short distance from the starting point before making your first stop. This stop should be within sight of the starting point which allows latecomers to catch up.

Always keep the lead. Walk only as fast as the slowest in the group. If desired, the MNA can bring up the rear.

Plan your stops and wait for the group. One problem with groups in natural areas is getting them into a position where all can hear. This is especially important on a narrow trail. Those in the back may be annoyed because they are missing what the naturalist is explaining. Wait for every- one to get to the proper location. If necessary, arrange the group and direct people where to stand, but do not allow them to “bunch” around you by going off the trail. You may also stop the group and walk to the middle of the line or speak from an uphill vantage point if possible. Make use of switchbacks to address the group.

Model proper behavior. When visiting natural areas later, audience members will do what they saw you do, not what you told them to do. For example, we tell people to “stay on the trails.” As the leader, you also must stay on the trails. Take binoculars to get a better look at something far away, don’t go off the trail and bring it back to the tour group. Don’t pick plants to show the group, as you are setting an example.

Make sure you can be heard. Speak clearly, don’t talk too fast, and don’t shout. Stopping close to running water, in a windy place, or near traffic is not a good idea. Keep your voice low and address the group before entering the natural area or while at the periphery of the area as much as possible. Encourage people to sit or stand quietly for a short time to absorb the sounds, sights and smells.

Practice your verbal descriptions. When looking through binoculars or a spotting scope it is just as important to describe the location accurately to others as it is to find it yourself. Remember that some people may not have much experience using equipment in the field and may become frustrated if they can’t locate something. Be very specific in describing the location: “The first tree with no leaves, halfway up, on the left side, just behind the darkest branch,” not “Over there in those trees” or “In the water.”

Involve the group. Encourage discussions, but don’t lapse into academic treatises. Draw on listener experience.

Do not keep the group in one place too long, as many will become restless.

Don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know.” No subject is so completely mastered that all the answers are known, and the average group can ask a vast assortment of questions on a variety of subjects. It is impossible to anticipate every question.

At the end of the field trip, gather the group and review the walk. This allows you to re- emphasize your theme and to tie the trip together into a total picture.

Dismiss the group at the end of the walk. Some people may be reluctant to leave wondering if it would be discourteous. Invite people to stay afterwards for questions and discussion. Don’t forget- end on time!