

Effective Chaperone Selection and Training for Enhanced Youth Experiences

Abstract

This article identifies key strategies for selecting and training chaperones for youth programs. Although substantial research on volunteer core competencies and training exists, very little has been written to specifically address volunteers who serve in a chaperone capacity. We surveyed chaperones who had participated in an international youth development program to identify the most valuable personal characteristics of a successful chaperone and the most beneficial elements of a pre-event chaperone training program. The lists of these key characteristics and training topics can be used by Extension professionals in selecting chaperones and designing training opportunities for their own programs.

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Introduction

Chaperones are used throughout Extension programming for a variety of youth development events. Residential camping programs, exchange programs, day camps, field trips, and other events all require chaperones for risk management purposes, among other reasons. Securing and educating chaperones can easily become an afterthought when Extension personnel are short on time and focused on preparing the educational program. However, volunteers are a valuable part of a program and are instrumental in determining the overall youth experience (Arnold, Dolenc, & Rennekamp, 2009). Additionally, indirect participants, such as chaperones, experience measurable benefits through their roles in international youth programming (Olberding & Olberding, 2010). Investing more effort into selecting the best possible volunteers for specific events and preparing them with high-quality training enhances the youth experience (Hoover & Connor, 2001) and has beneficial ripple effects for the volunteers themselves.

Background and Methods

The American Youth Leadership Program (AYLP) is a 3-week international cultural immersion program for youths coordinated by University of Wyoming Extension. We participated in this program as chaperones in 2014–2015. On our return, we realized the tremendous impact that the associated chaperone training and

preparation had had on our success or failure in serving the youth participants.

To tease out the most desirable characteristics of high-quality chaperones and identify important training needs, we created a survey that was distributed to 22 chaperones who had served in the AYLP during the years of 2013 through 2015. This sample was made up of Extension educators, state Extension staff, and school teachers from across the western United States.

Results

Although the survey did not yield data having statistical significance, the survey results along with our own experiences provided information we could use to identify best practices for selecting and training chaperones. If you are a youth development program manager or are otherwise involved in such activities, you may benefit from applying the practices described herein.

Selecting Chaperones

When recruiting potential chaperones for a youth program, begin early to ensure that you have reached the best possible candidates. During the recruitment process, provide potential chaperones with a position description that includes clearly defined expectations and specific responsibilities for the role. A position description is an important recruitment tool that also serves as an agreement between the volunteer and the organization. If volunteers do not understand what is expected of them, they will not be inclined to participate, will not experience success, or will not have a positive experience (Culp, 2013).

Additionally, screening volunteers by performing background checks, reference checks, interviews, and other risk-minimizing procedures allows you (a) to identify individuals who are appropriate role models and (b) to protect youth participants from harm (McNeely, Schmiesing, King, & Kleon, 2002).

Considerable research has been done on core competencies of Extension volunteers. One study showed that the most significant of these include communication, organization/planning skills, subject matter skills, and interpersonal skills (Culp, McKee, & Nestor, 2007). Very little research has identified key characteristics specific to volunteers serving in chaperone roles, however. According to our survey results, essential personal traits for volunteers serving in this capacity are

- authenticity,

- sense of humor,

- flexibility,

- compassion,

- effective listening skills,

- high level of energy,

- ability to engage,

- supportiveness,
- positivity,
- patience, and
- organization skills.

Through the recruitment and selection process, make an effort to seek out chaperone candidates who possess these qualities and validate them during the selection process.

Training Chaperones

Providing comprehensive pre-event training will make a meaningful difference in the success of your chaperones. Research has shown that enhancing the experience, understanding, and satisfaction of volunteers is closely linked to youth participants' reaching their full potential. When volunteers feel well supported and appropriately trained, they become stronger assets to the program (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000).

A cursory review of 4-H programs nationwide uncovered several online chaperone training modules and webinars. These are intended as broad-scale training opportunities for qualifying volunteers to serve in multiple overnight programming capacities. Although these opportunities provide an initial foundation of knowledge and understanding, we recommend that they be supplemented with thorough event-specific training to better prepare volunteers for their precise duties and responsibilities.

The timeline and duration of training depends on program type. A 3-week international homestay event such as the AYLIP requires a far more in-depth experience than that required for a 1-day field course. Providing a brief chaperone orientation on the day of the event may be sufficient in some cases. In others, you may want to consider regular conference calls in the months leading up to the event or a multiday chaperone training program.

Our survey presented participants with a list of topics that could be included in chaperone training. We asked those surveyed to choose which they felt were, or would be, the most and least important to their success as a chaperone. The most important, in order of response frequency, were

1. supporting youths through homesickness, hardships, and emotional struggles;
2. chaperone responsibilities—pre-event, during the event, and after the event;
3. appreciating diversity;
4. getting comfortable with being uncomfortable;
5. potential behavior situations and how to be prepared for them; and
6. international travel as an adventure.

The least valuable topics, according to those surveyed, were

1. guidelines for technology and personal entertainment,
2. icebreakers and time fillers,
3. ages and stages of youth development,
4. packing,
5. situational role-playing, and
6. navigating dietary restrictions and food preferences.

Conclusion and Implications

Targeted selection of chaperones with specific qualifications and thorough training programs can greatly improve event quality and enhance the experience of program participants. Volunteers who have been chosen through careful screening and prepared through precise position descriptions and thorough orientations improve the learning environment for all involved (Fox, Hebert, Tassin, & Hebert, 2008).

Program managers should select chaperone candidates who possess characteristics found to be beneficial in successful chaperones. Once chaperones are selected, program managers should consider including the top six training topics identified herein when designing their orientation program.

Further research is needed on the most effective recruitment strategies for finding volunteers with the core competencies and personal characteristics that make the most effective chaperones. The results of such research would contribute to ensuring a high-quality applicant pool when program managers are ready for the next step of chaperone selection.

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