

Leading Groups Outdoors: Human Dangers

As a leader bringing young people into outdoor spaces, it is your responsibility to know the risks involved and be prepared. While certain environmental concerns may seem obvious – a lightning storm, a bear in your campsite – less often talked about are dangers from other humans.

Many white, cis Americans, have the privilege of visiting an outdoor recreation space without thinking twice about their own safety, or whether others will question whether they belong in that space. For BIPOC and other marginalized communities, outdoor spaces can carry inherent risks from other people. Whether or not you share certain identities with the group of young people you are leading outdoors, you should be aware of the risks involved and prepared to act. You are the advocate for your group, and should be monitoring and assessing the risks and encounters with other people, just as you would monitor and assess environmental risks. Below are few tips to prepare you.

*Educate yourself as a leader. Know the history of land on which you will be recreating and traveling through. Understand that long histories of racism, violence, dispossession and segregation in public parks and green spaces deeply impacts how people relate to these places.

*Get to know your young people - their anxieties, joys, fears, hopes. What are they looking forward to about the experience you have planned? What are they nervous about, and how can you meet them where they are? What identities do they hold, visible or not, that may impact how they experience the trip and potential dangers? Do not force your own relationship with the outdoors on the young people you are taking outdoors, or create a narrative that you expect them to fall into. Avoid saviorism (“It’s so great that we’re taking these kids out of the city to go camping for the first time”).

*Listen to and trust your young people. If something feels off to them about a situation, hear them and act on it. Make sure you build trust so they see you as a person they can turn to if a situation feels unsafe.

- Not every concern may require an immediate action. You can invite your young people to share any worries that might not need immediate action (such as a worrisome flag at a campsite) so that you can become the monitor of the situation rather than them.
- In certain situations (depending on age, safety considerations, etc), you may choose to include young people in the decision making process about next steps in regards to the situation.

*Create some ground rules with your group before your outdoor experience. Let your group know it is your job to keep them safe and that they should come to you. If you don’t want your group talking with strangers, establish that before the trip. Consider creating some policies ahead of time - similar to how you might have a lighting drill for bad weather, come up with a plan for encountering human dangers:

- A code word with your group if they feel uncomfortable about a situation.
- Whistles are a great tool - someone can use it if they are lost, or you could have a signal that means they need help.
- A scatter and whistle policy for emergencies: if you give the directive to scatter due to an imminent human threat, your group should scatter a set distance and return when they hear your signal.

* Remember that you are the advocate for the young people you are leading. Similar to how you would with environmental hazards, always be monitoring the situation and assessing risks. Orient yourself to your surroundings and have a bail out plan. Monitor engagement your group may be having. Be ready to intervene and put yourself between your group and a potential situation.

*If you witness micro aggressions, address them. Check in and make sure your group is safe first, and what they may need, then be an advocate. Allowing people to make subtle comments that demean the humanity of others creates a normalization of it, and increases the likelihood that that person will continue to make comments or exhibit aggressive behavior.

*At the same time, trust your gut. If you think the priority in the situation is to immediately disengage and remove your group from the situation, then do so.

*When you get to a location (park, lodge, campground, campsite, etc.) consider the scene. Who might your allies be if a situation were to arise? This might be staff, a park ranger, a campsite caretaker, the family camped nearby to you. Establish that relationship so there is someone you can turn to in case of a situation, or even if something just doesn't feel right. If you aren't near people, is there a person or a number that you know to call if in need of assistance?

- Know that for many people, the police and others in positions of authority are not an entity that brings a feeling of safety.
- In addition to identifying potential allies, in certain situations you may also want to identify anyone who could be a threat or perceived threat to your young people.

*Being aware of your environment does not just mean on the trail or campsite or park you're at. Are you traveling? Take all locations of your experience into consideration as you're considering your environment. Different risks and dangers may be specific to the region you are in.

- Are there certain political signs and symbols (politicians, Confederate flags, etc) you may see while traveling to your destination that may be triggering for you and/or your young people?
- Are you driving within 100 miles of a border, where you could be stopped by immigration officials? Know your rights: <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/border-zone/>
- When you stop at gas stations and restaurants, be sure to go indoors with your young people, so you are present to navigate any encounters that arise.

*Whenever possible, keep your group safe without your young people having to make themselves smaller. Follow posted guidelines and be considerate towards other visitors, while also recognizing that norms against being "too loud," listening to music outdoors, wearing certain clothing, and having fun in large groups are largely racist. There is no "right" way to be outdoors. Safety is paramount, and we also want people to be able to claim their place in outdoor spaces and not feel like they need to diminish themselves in order to make others more comfortable.

"It is true: I cannot protect you. But there is one thing I can continue to do: let you know that you are not alone in doing this big, monumental thing. You deserve a life of adventure, of joy, of enlightenment. The outdoors are part of our inheritance. So I will keep writing, posting photos, and doing my own signaling. For every new place I visit, and the old ones I return to, my message to you is that you belong here, too." - Latria Graham