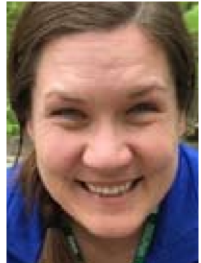
A parent chaperone and a second-grade student investigate seed dispersal in the field at Rowe Woods.

It's Not You. IT'S ME

Taking Responsibility for Chaperone Engagement During Nature Center Field Trips



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Eye rolls. Groans. Defeated stares. These are the sights and sounds of my countless conversations with field trip coordinators over the past five years. It's a sensory overload of frustration surrounding one topic: field trip chaperones. If you released an exasperated sigh at the mere mention of chaperones, then this article is for you.

When I began managing the field trip program at Cincinnati Nature Center (CNC) in 2011, I noticed a wide array of behaviors from parent chaperones who attended our field trips. Some eagerly corralled first graders, showed enthusiasm for the outdoors, and helped whenever asked. Others created distractions for students, played on their phones, or disengaged from the day altogether, causing me to wonder why they even came. The chaperone superstars gave us hope, and their villain-esque opposites took it away. Complaints about parent chaperones are common in the interpretive field. My personal favorite was the day a chaperone sat down for lunch, put in headphones, and turned her back on the group until lunch ended. One field trip coordinator I met said, "If I didn't need chaperones for liability reasons, I would ban them from my program."

As interpreters, we are trained to work with a wide range of people of different ages, interests, and backgrounds. We thrive on flexibility and adapt to many situations, so why has this one group of adults managed to create such anxiety? I'm proposing

that perhaps it's not their fault, and that we may be overlooking their potential as an audience.

While students are the primary focus of most school programs at nature centers, chaperones have become the caboose to thousands of field trips around the country. They follow their group on the trails but play no significant role in the day, leaving the bulk of program delivery to the professionals. But if I really think about who has the potential to impact these students long term, my money would not be on the naturalists they meet once or twice over the course of their childhood. It pains me to say that, but the reality is that parents and teachers are with these kids every single day. Parental attitudes about nature can have a huge impact on the amount of outdoor time their children experience outside of school. If we ignore or turn away parent chaperones, we could be missing an opportunity to encourage more regular family outdoor experiences.

When I started my job at CNC, chaperones had two primary jobs: walk at the back of the group and carry our equipment. With this not-so-enthralling task filling their time, it's easy to imagine how they might disengage or catch up on social media during their child's field trip. When I began to critique our interactions with chaperones, a harsh realization hit me. Many of the "bad behaviors" chaperones displayed could have been our fault, caused by our lack of communication. Teachers, chaperones, and nature centers may have completely different expectations from one another about what role chaperones should fill during a field trip. Picture a chaperone arriving for a field trip expecting to be the disciplinarian, while the teacher expects them to facilitate student learning. At the same time, the field trip provider expects the chaperone to quietly follow the group and minimize distractions. Without communication between chaperone, teacher, and field trip coordinator, the chaperone is positioned to fail.

With this in mind, I began to look for a way to effectively prepare chaperones for their role during field trips. My first trial happened by necessity in 2013 when I learned 26 chaperones were on their way for a field trip with 40 second graders. Did you just cringe at the size of that chaperone group? I did, too—at first. Instead of having a really tough day with an army of badly behaved chaperones, I pulled them aside as students unloaded from the bus and laid out my expectations for the day. It was the first of many conversations with chaperones at the start of our field trip days.

Since then, the training has become an important piece of communication to promote positive participation, leadership, and "good behavior" from visiting chaperones. The training includes: encouragement to be an active member of trail groups, suggestions to model curiosity and ask students questions, and reminders to share discoveries with students. We also ask chaperones to jump in and take the lead if they feel comfortable with a particular activity.

It's not just about training the parents though. If CNC naturalists weren't interested in chaperones being more active in the day, we would have wasted our breath with the chaperone orientation. To complement our work with chaperones, naturalists were trained in techniques to prompt positive engagement and give chaperones more meaningful roles during the field trip. After the first year of conducting chaperone orientations and working with our teaching team, CNC naturalists were regularly commenting on the positive difference in chaperone behaviors. To quantify these comments, I did some field research this year on the impacts of chaperone training and naturalist prompts.

Students transfer a heavy load of maple sap to a new bucket with help from their chaperone.

Parents chaperoning a field trip to CNC are pulled aside for a brief training while students unload from the bus.

The Study

Each field trip day, chaperones either received an orientation as students got off the bus, or they received no orientation and joined their trail groups without hearing expectations for their participation. (I don't think my naturalists were thrilled with the idea of untrained chaperones, but we must sacrifice *for science!)* Once trail groups met their naturalists and headed to the woods, I joined the group and discretely recorded positive, negative, and neutral behaviors of chaperones during a 30-minute window.

Examples of positive behaviors included: participating in or leading a group activity, helping students, and quietly redirecting students. Some negative behaviors included: using a cell phone, standing or sitting apart from the group, and talking with other chaperones about matters unrelated to the field trip.

At the end of the study, the behaviors of the chaperones who had been trained were compared to those who had received no training. When it came down to those "bad behaviors" we often identify with chaperones, the untrained chaperones exhibited a much higher number than their trained counterparts. Untrained chaperones whispered the answers to questions in student ears, used their cell phones, wandered away from the group, and created more distractions.

Interestingly, there was not much of a difference in the number of positive behaviors recorded between trained and untrained chaperones. Quietly following the group gave me the opportunity to observe a plethora of positive behaviors I would have missed had I been teaching. Even the chaperones who couldn't bear to put their phones down had more positive behaviors than negative. They participated in group activities, helped students, made positive comments, and quietly redirected students (all while live tweeting the field trip!).

A great example of a chaperone applying their training came up at the pond. The chaperones are asked to insert "How interesting!" when they're uncomfortable instead of showing a fearful or disgusted reaction, allowing students to build positive connections with experiences and animals that could

be perceived as unpleasant. One chaperone had pond water splash her and yelled, "Eww! It's on me!" Then she looked at the children, laughed, and said, "I mean, how *interesting!* I guess it's only a little water, huh?"

We learned that training chaperones can create a decrease in negative behaviors, but what about increasing the positive ones? As it turns out, the chaperones who were prompted by their group leaders to actively participate blew their positive behavior scores through the roof. Naturalists asked chaperones to smell leaves with students or give their thoughts about a snail the students found, making them an equal member of the trail group. Chaperones were asked to lead students across a boardwalk looking for frogs, or run a small group discussion after looking under logs for invertebrates. I observed countless examples of naturalists creating an inclusive culture within their trail group, cultivating a positive experience for everyone.

The results of this study suggest we have an opportunity ahead of us to work more with chaperones. They also remind me of our responsibility as interpreters to be inclusive and look for new ways to serve our audiences. Sharing expectations with chaperones at the beginning of the day could confirm the positive behaviors and remind them of unwanted behaviors, and training for naturalists could hold the key to improving positive chaperone participation during field trips. I encourage you in the coming school year to try new ways to make chaperone experiences more meaningful in your programs. They deserve more from us than just tolerance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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