

# SAFETY HABITS OF MIND

By Katrina Abbott and Scott Hartl



Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound  
100 Mystery Point Road  
Garrison, NY 10524

## **Safety Habits of Mind**

Dear Colleague,

Expeditionary Learning teachers are re-defining the field trip. Teachers and students are venturing beyond the school walls to interview community members, sketch buildings, conduct detailed experiments and observations, and answer questions that cannot be looked up or found easily in textbooks. Purposeful fieldwork such as this enriches student learning with direct experience, and a strong connection to the local community. It offers a context for learning that is often more authentic than that which could be created in the classroom alone.

As fieldwork becomes increasingly common in the school lives of students and teachers, the need for careful planning regarding issues of safe practice and risk management take on increasing importance. In the past eight years Expeditionary Learning teachers have learned a great deal about how to plan and conduct fieldwork. The intent of this letter to colleagues is to consolidate and share these lessons and to begin to create a set of standards for fieldwork practices that strive to maximize both safety and educational effectiveness.

The majority of issues addressed in this letter will be common sense to you because you have been dealing with issues of physical and emotional safety for your entire school career. This document will focus on the big ideas and the key systems and habits that underlie safe fieldwork practices. It is not our intent to outline the guidelines or protocols for specific activities; this task is the responsibility of each individual Expeditionary Learning school.

Because this letter is written for educators K through 12 there are many developmentally specific issues that we do not address. We recognize that structuring and supervising fieldwork for early elementary students will be very different than for middle school students and different again for high school students. Individual teachers will need to tailor these ideas to fit the unique needs of their particular groups of students,

It is important to note that high adventure activities, those that require special skills and technical knowledge (e.g. rock climbing, spelunking, white water boating, winter hiking, overnight camping trips, etc.), are not addressed in this letter. We recommend that Expeditionary Learning schools contract with Outward Bound Schools or Centers, or equally qualified organizations for any of these high adventure activities.

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## **I. Planning for Fieldwork**

Fieldwork is a term that encompasses a wide range of activities that present an equally wide range of safety issues. Fieldwork could be an activity such as visiting a museum or a business where the environment is relatively controlled and the safety issues limited to those on a typical field trip. Fieldwork might also include activities like studying a pond or conducting a census of a city neighborhood that take place in environments that are less easily controlled and require significant preparation and forethought on the part of both teachers and students.

In planning for each fieldwork activity the leader should consider the following questions:

### **What potential safety risks might you encounter during this outing? And, have you thought through the what-ifs, the worst-case scenarios?**

What are the neighborhoods like that you will be traveling through? Will you be walking on busy streets? Will you be near open water? And, what if, for example:

- ...someone gets split from the group?
- ...someone gets hurt?
- ...you come across hostile people or animals?
- ...a student needs to be sent back to the school?

Proactive thinking about potential safety issues such as these will reduce the chances of their ever occurring and increase the chances of your responding effectively if they do.

### **Are you taking the smallest group possible?**

Keeping the group size small is one of the most effective ways to keep a trip safe and educationally productive. Conversely, a whole class, or worse, a busload in the field is very difficult for any teacher to keep under control and on-task. Ask a teammate to cover some of your class and take out a smaller number of students or request substitute coverage for the students who will be staying behind. If the fieldwork site is local you may be able to cycle all the students through the experience in a day.

### **Is the adult to student ratio appropriate for the activity and the group and as low as possible?**

If you have more than five or six students then you may need to arrange for extra adult help. The appropriate ratio of adults to students will vary depending on the nature of the fieldwork, the location, the age and behavioral maturity of your students, etc. Outward Bound schools and Centers maintain a

student to instructor ratio of 6 to 1 for all field experiences and lower student to instructor ratios are standard for adolescent programs.

Low adult to student ratios can be attained in several ways. When the fieldwork is local, small groups of students can be taken out throughout the day or over a series of days if you can creatively arrange for coverage of the other students. When the entire class is out together, then small sub-teams can be created by recruiting parents and other adults in the school.

### **Are you familiar with the fieldwork site?**

When you venture beyond common resources such as a museum or a library and into less controlled environments, then your knowledge of the current conditions of the neighborhood or area in which you will be traveling and working is one of the most important dimensions of keeping fieldwork safe. Scout out the area before you take your students there. Know the route that you will take, choose a safe meeting place in case the group gets separated or any incident occurs. Familiarize yourself with where telephones are that could be used in case of an emergency and where the nearest medical facilities are with emergency care capacity.

### **Does a trustworthy contact person at the school have copies of your plans for the day?**

Leave a written itinerary of your plans and the names of the students going with you with a designated person at the school. Your itinerary should outline what you are doing, where you are going, when you are going and the potential hazards of your trip.

\* See Appendix B for a sample fieldwork information form that could be used to record this information.

### **Do you have a dependable communication link to the school?**

Designating one contact person that you know can be reached while you are out is an important link in the safety system. The contact person should have a copy of your fieldwork information form and a list of student who will be with you.

### **Have you compiled a field safety kit for the trip?**

Some basic items can be gathered into field safety kits to be carried by each adult during any outing. Field safety kits can be assembled once and then be available for all future fieldwork. The kit could include items such as:

- several quarters for phone calls

- basic first aid supplies (bandages, disinfectant, compress, pair of rubber gloves)
- list of emergency numbers.

The following trip specific items can be arranged for each trip:

- emergency money (for cabs, etc.)
- map of the area where you will be
- copy of your trip itinerary.

### **Do you know what the weather forecast is? And, are you prepared for unprepared students?**

Extremes of weather can quickly complicate a field-based activity if you are not prepared for it. It is always advisable to bring extra clothes and food for unprepared students.

### **Are the staff and students briefed on the safety issues of the trip?**

What do the adults need to know to manage their groups safely? What do the students need to know to manage themselves safely? And, when do the adults and students need to know this information to be prepared? Discuss safety issues with students and assisting adults before each outing. In your pre-trip discussion with students and assisting adults discuss the what ifs, go over the fieldwork information sheet, talk about your expectations for street travel or behavior on public transportation. Go over what to do if anyone is lost or separated from the group.

### **Do you know your students' medical histories?**

Do they have any potentially serious medical conditions (e.g. allergic reactions, heart problems), do they have severe phobias, are they non-swimmers, who is allergic to bee stings, specific foods or medications? When students have filled out a medical form for the trip, it should be carried into the field by the group leader.

### **Are the tasks engaging and well organized?**

Just as in the classroom, one of the most effective strategies for managing fieldwork safely is to have well planned and engaging activities that will keep the students focused and on-task.

## **II. Traveling and Working in the Field**

The following is a description of some common practices for traveling and working in the field. This list is not exhaustive, but it begins to capture the combined experiences and “best practices” of a growing group of Expeditionary Learning teachers and students. It is the authors’ intent that this list of common practices grow and mature through multiple revisions as Expeditionary Learning teachers continue to deepen their understanding of how to run safe and educationally sound fieldwork experiences.

### **Working and traveling as a group:**

When working and traveling as a group, stay together within sight and sound of each other. In certain situations with older students, their maturity level (not always correlated to age level) may allow for traveling and/or working in the field with less supervision. Parents should always be aware of the amount of supervision that their children will be getting.

Establish a safe place to meet if the group is separated and ensure that this is understood by all students and adults in the group.

Assign a number to each student and ‘count off’ at selected points of the trip to ensure that all students are present.

For very young children, you may want to include safety information such as their name, the schools name and phone number on a piece of paper pinned **inside** their coat or clothing. Inside so that this information will only be seen if they are separated from the group and someone needs information.

Identify a person who will be in the front of the group, a "lead", and a person who will stay at the end, a "sweep". The lead and the sweep should be either adults or trusted students, as appropriate.

Ask students to dress appropriately for the environment they are traveling in. Some clothing may send messages of aggression and flashy jewelry may be an invitation for conflict.

### **Street Travel:**

Brief students on street crossings before arriving at their first crossing. Many students will be used to treating street crossings casually and will need to be reminded to cross streets only at a designated cross walk or corner, wait for the entire group and cross with the “WALK” signal and/ or green light.

Walking on roads without sidewalks should be avoided if possible. If it is necessary to travel on a street without sidewalks then walk single file, on the shoulder facing traffic.

Avoid stopping to talk in congested areas; find a well lit, out of the way place to talk as a group.

Avoid dark and deserted streets and “short-cuts” through parks, tunnels, etc.

### **Public Transportation:**

When traveling on buses or the subway, avoid crowded cars where a large group will be intrusive. Try to use two doors for boarding to cut down on crowding. Adults should count students once they are all in the bus or subway car and when they get off.

When traveling in the subway or trolley, have everyone in your group travel in the same car.

While waiting for a bus or subway, have students stand well away from the side of the road or the edge of the platform. Stay out of dark, un-lit and isolated places, and within sight of any station attendant.

### **Private vehicles:**

Be clear on the policies that your school has on students traveling in private vehicles and make sure these policies are enforced. If you feel a driver or a car is unsafe, find an alternative or you may need to cancel the trip.

As a teacher, you may need to follow the same requirements as other drivers. Be clear on the transportation school policies you need to adhere to while driving students.

With older students, create a safe policy for students driving other students to fieldwork sites.

Advise parents of how their children will be transported.

### **Tools and Implements:**

Any time tools are used for field work, appropriate training and supervision and equipment should be provided. Some tools, such as power tools and sharp implements, may be inappropriate for novices to use.

Eye, ear and body protection should be used as appropriate when using tools.

Although most people believe they know how to use knives, knife accidents are a common cause of injuries. If students are using sharp knives (including mat knives, etc.) they must have an overview on safe ways to handle knives and be closely monitored in their use. For many student populations the use of sharp knives is not appropriate.

### **Natural Environments:**

Prior to visiting field sites with water, such as ponds, lakes, rivers or the ocean, brief students on hazards and guidelines. Being in the water presents unique hazards and should be avoided unless you have specifically prepared for the activity, carry the appropriate certifications and have the approval of your administration and parents.

A sound policy on diving is no diving, ever.

Students should wear proper footwear at all times. Foot injuries from broken glass, metal cans etc. or from sprained or strained ankles are some of the most common injuries.

Trees and rocks are often tempting for students to climb. Safe climbing, even when the student is less than a body height above the ground, requires skilled spotters and highly controlled environment.

Be aware that weather can change while the group is in the field. It is a good idea to be prepared for all conditions and to bring more clothing and food than you believe you will need.

### **Initiatives and New Games:**

Every initiative problem should include three stages:

1. Briefing, or verbal presentation of the problem.
2. The attempt by the group to solve the problem.
3. Debriefing how they functioned in the initiative attempt.

Sequence the initiatives and new games to start with less complex tasks that are within the ability level of your group and move progressively toward more complex activities only as the skill level and maturity of the group allows.

An initiative participant should never be in a position where her/his feet are above her/his head.

If the initiative requires touching, participants should be briefed on respectful physical contact. Anyone who does not want to participate in the initiative for personal reasons should be allowed to step out. Some people have reasons for not wanting to be touched.

Objects to be thrown should be soft and without sharp projections, so as not to hurt if they hit a participant in the head or face.

Present the problem clearly and be clear about what additional props or equipment are allowed.

Do not disengage from what is happening- pay attention, observe behaviors and be positive.

Remember that a positive learning experience does not always mean successful completion of a task-no matter how much the instructor and/or the participants may want that to occur.

**\* The information in this section draws heavily on the *Ropes Course Safety Manual* from Project Adventure and the *Manual of Accreditation Standards for Adventure Programs* from the Association for Experiential Education.**

### **III. School Safety Systems**

#### **Designate a person at the school to be on call during each outing:**

A person at the school should be on call during all fieldwork. The fieldwork information form should be given to the contact person before leaving.

Beepers could be used to enhance communication if there is a lot of fieldwork happening beyond school hours or if there is not a reliable person answering the phone.

There should be a designated school-based person carrying a beeper so that they can always be contacted by staff in the field in case of emergency. There should be one staff member in the field carrying a beeper so that they can always be contacted in case of emergency.

#### **Keep track of accidents and incidents that occur during fieldwork:**

Keeping quality records on the accidents and incidents that occur during fieldwork is an important part of maintaining a safe organization. It is especially important to record information on “near-misses”, when an accident or and incident was narrowly avoided in addition to the data on actual

mishaps. Trends emerge over time from your data that will provide valuable information in managing future fieldwork.

\* See Appendix C for a sample accident/incident information form that could be used to record this information.

**Designated a person in each building to coordinate safety issues:**

This might be the Principal or a designated teacher or administrator. Institutionalizing the role of a safety coordinator in itself raises consciousness about the importance of safety issues. The safety coordinator could track the accident/incident data, consult on safe practices for fieldwork and approve particular activities.

## Appendix A

### Planning for Fieldwork Check List

#### Before the Trip

- Fill out Field Work Information Sheet (Appendix B, page 13) and give to designated staff member.
- Ask appropriate number of adults to assist with trip;
- If adults need to drive, determine if they have credentials as stated by school policy and paperwork is on file if necessary
- Prior to the trip, provide all adults/drivers with:
  - information on fieldwork location
  - driving directions to location
  - time to meet
  - appropriate clothing
  - a schedule of the day
  - what their role will be
- Have field safety kits for each independent group on the trip
- Have adults arrive with enough time so they can get a briefing on the flow of the day and any last minute information
- Listen to a weather forecast if your field work will be dependent on weather.
- Brief students on field work trip before hand including;
  - the schedule for the day
  - proper clothing and footwear (keep weather forecast in mind)
  - food or meals they should bring

#### Day of the Trip

- Brief adults on any last minute changes and updates
- Hand out and explain the field safety kits; ask if any adults have medical or first aid training
- Brief student on the field work site once you are there; indicate boundaries of work area and any potential hazards
- Be aware of student and adult needs and changing weather conditions
- If there is an emergency, refer to the Emergency Action Plan (page?)
- Before leaving the field work site, account for all the students and adults
- If any incidents occurred during the trip, write up information on Field work incident report form and give to designated staff member.

Appendix B

**FIELDWORK INFORMATION SHEET**

(This sheet should be filled out and discussed with the school principal and/or the safety coordinator and contact person for the trip prior to leaving for the field.)

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

TEACHER(S)/LEADER(S): \_\_\_\_\_

TIME IN FIELD (INCLUDING TRAVEL): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

FIELDWORK SITE: LOCATION/ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE (or location of closest telephone): \_\_\_\_\_

HOW YOU ARE GETTING TO THE FIELD SITE (TRANSPORTATION)

\_\_\_\_\_

CONTACT PERSON AT SITE: \_\_\_\_\_

ACTIVITIES: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

POSSIBLE SAFETY ISSUES: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

EMERGENCY PLAN:

Nearest Hospital/clinic (with: emergency care capabilities): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C

Field Work Incidents/Near-Misses

**Date:**

**Name of injured/ill party:**

**Location where accident/incident occurred:**

**Narrative on incident:** Describe the incident completely. Include how the incident happened and the final outcome. Attach physician's or other care provider's report if the student or employee was examined by one.

**Analysis:** Include any observations or suggestions regarding how the incident could have been prevented.

**Additional comments:**

Report prepared by: \_\_\_\_\_ School/Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Other staff involved: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Emergency Action Steps

1. Stay calm
2. Assess the situation and get your students and yourself out of immediate danger.
3. If your student is injured or in danger, call 911. Speed is especially important if life threatening situations occur, such as profuse bleeding, cardiac arrest, unconsciousness or lack of breathing.
4. Call your school and pass the information on about the situation. Follow your school policy about calling parents and speaking to the press.

## Appendix E

### Hiring an Outside Vendor - Questions To Ask

1. Does the organization have liability insurance?  
(ask for a copy of their insurance certificate and have it on file)
2. Do they have any grievances files against them?  
(the Better Business Bureau can give you this information)
3. How long have they been in business? How long have they been running this type of program?
4. What is their safety record of this particular type of activity?
5. Do they have an emergency response plan?
6. Will they give you names of former and current clients? May you call them?  
(call and ask about quality and safety of the program, if the product is available to inspect [such as a ropes course), examine it.
7. Does the organization offer a certification program? If so, is the certification recognized by a national entity? What does the qualification/ certification require as far as testing, updates, etc.?
8. Have other EL schools used this vendor? If so, what is the quality of the service?- (do we set up some sort of clearing house?)