
Dealing with Difficulties

If you've ever had a group with one or more "difficult" or "spirited" students (i.e. hyperactive, not listening, running ahead, loud) or even a entire group of them, it can be frustrating. If you're not prepared and don't know quite what to do, it can lead to feeling helpless and out of control. There is hope. If you take steps to head off the problems before they start, chances are that things will proceed much more pleasantly.

On the trail:

Be very clear on boundaries, rules and consequences

If students aren't aware of certain rules, you may find yourself frustrated and constantly having to tell them to stop doing this or that.

i.e. If allowing them ahead of you, make it known that they have to be able to stop when you tell them.

i.e. We tell them to "be nice to nature"—some groups may need clarification before starting out

Make sure to enforce rules immediately

Many students like to test the rules, see how much they can get away with. If they get away with something you've told them not to do, they will keep doing it and others will join. Make it clear that you mean business from the start and problems can be avoided. If necessary, use a stepped warning system to let them know you're watching.

Only list consequences you're able to enforce

You can't change their grades or keep them in from recess. You can't even send them back to the building. But you are able to make them walk next to you while others continue to be allowed in front. Or they can be made to sit out of a fun activity, like trying to catch bugs, they may have to sit out if they can't behave.

Getting their attention

"Attention getters" teachers use are often handy in getting students' attention. The trick is figuring out the one they use! Common ones are "1-2-3 Eyes on me" a clapping rhythm, or "Give me five" (said while raising your hand...but that doesn't always work!) One we've used here that seems to work is "If you can hear me put your hand on your...head, nose, knee, etc"

Maintain the appearance of being in control

Even if you feel like going crazy, stay calm and don't yell to get their attention or get them to do something. Don't talk louder to make yourself heard; often their volume will increase along with yours. Have something worked out that indicates they need to stop what they are doing. A signal they can recognize, like a bird call, a hoot or a whistle. Have them practice stopping when you signal before heading out.

Whole group is having problems?

Sometimes what you're doing isn't working and you need to change...fast! If you have a hard time changing your plan mid-program, try to have some ideas up your sleeve and ready to use. Sometimes there isn't much to see (or that is keeping their attention).

If they're getting squirrely on a walk from Point A to Point B, try a game that you can do while moving such as Flash Flood or the Owl game. Or if you're stuck in one spot (while waiting for another group to move on) try playing I-Spy and fit it to the theme (seasons/senses, homes/habitats, seeds, etc)

Flash Flood—Leader yells out “Flash Flood” and counts to 10. Kids have to be off the ground by last count. (on a rock, upraised root, etc)

Owl game – The leader is the owl; whenever the owl hoots, the mice (students) must freeze to hide from the owl. If anyone moves, they are eaten by the owl. When a mouse is eaten, he or she stands by the leader

Know when to draw the line

There may be some actions that you normally discourage (carrying sticks, rocks, etc) but with some groups that are a bit more energetic, sometimes finding a way to tolerate it is best, as long as the students behave alright once they have it. (offenders will lose the right to do this!) Find a way to incorporate some learning if possible.

i.e. kids want to throw something in the river as you're walking the trail. If you're going the right direction, have them pick sticks, then see if you can beat the floating sticks to the next spot on the river (would work either on Owl or Trout Lily trails)

Keeping kids quiet

It's not possible to keep kids quiet all the time, but for short periods, there are things that normally work.

i.e. When passing or near another group, ask yours to pretend they are invisible. They don't want anyone to know they are there---so they need to be silent, not waving or anything else.

i.e. Whenever taking a deer trail shortcut, tell them that since we're following a deer trail we need to be quiet like deer. Once in while, one or two kids don't get it but the others generally shush them pretty well.