


A Parent's Field Guide to Field Trips

A parent recently wrote us to about her three and one-half year old  child's scheduled field trip to a nature center. "I really wanted my child to attend," the parent wrote," but felt uncomfortable without attending with him. I asked if it would be okay if I went, but was told no because it would be distracting to the children. In addition, I had to sign a release of responsibility... Most of his classmates are attending and the parents don't seem to be concerned."

Next week Dr. Kardos's child will go on a class trip to a farm. Last week one of Dr. Lai's children went with her class to a colonial plantation. Spring field trips often are the highlight of a child's school year and take learning to a different level. Sometimes you are asked to chaperone as a parent, but what if you aren't invited along? Particularly for parents of young children, it can be disconcerting when their children are taken out of a familiar structured class environment. Here are some steps you can take to insure their safety:

Check adult to child supervisory ratios. Developmentally appropriate ratios should be kept whether in the classroom or on trips. According to *Caring for our Children* (the national health and safety performance standards for out-of-home child care programs), for three year olds the maximum recommended child: staff ratio is 7:1, for four and five year olds the ratio is 8:1, for 6-8 year olds the ratio is 10:1, and for 9-12 years old 12:1

Ask teachers how they keep track of children. Often groups will have children wear the same brightly colored t-shirt. Usually, children are counted at several points during a visit.

Ask if previous class trips to the same place have gone smoothly. Chances are, the supervisory teacher has been to the site so many times that she knows every nook and cranny.

Check how the children will be transported. Ideally, they are

transported with age appropriate restraints. If they will be traveling in the traditional school bus, review bus safety with your child including sitting down and facing forward during the ride.

Be comfortable with the school's emergency procedures and notifications.

Remind your child to continue his good health habits even if you are not present. For instance, wash hands prior to eating and after going to the potty.

Get to know the adult supervisors. Connecting with the adult to whom you are entrusting your child will make you feel more comfortable when your child leaves school grounds.

Go ahead and visit the field trip site ahead of time if you need to visualize your child at his field trip. Who knows, you may emerge with plans to go again for a future birthday party.

Remember your goal is to grow a confident kid. Send the signals to your child that he will have a fun time- not that you will be watching the clock every second he is gone. Otherwise, he may approach the trip, and later other new situations, with trepidation rather than anticipation.

If there are medical or behavioral concerns, discuss them with your pediatrician and the adult supervisors before the trip. Since my own children have food allergies, I call teachers in advance to make sure there is an adult who is, if needed, comfortable administering an emergency shot of epinephrine. If you know your child has ADHD and needs constant redirection, perhaps additional adult supervision (not necessarily yourself) can be arranged.

Remember too that the reason parents need to sign permission slips before their children attend field trips is that parents have a choice. If you are not convinced about the value of a particular trip, by all means do not send your child.

Like many steps toward independence, a field trip can be a growing

experience for a child but nerve wracking for a parent. Reassure yourself that you are not sending your child off to an unsafe environment and then take pride when she returns confident, safe, and sound, and asking when she can go on another field trip.

Naline Lai, MD

© 2010 Two Peds in a Pod