

Managing Free Time during Scouting Activities

Key messages

- A large proportion of Scouts Victoria's incidents occur during free time and other non-structured periods.
- Leaders should be aware of the hazards around the site and set clear boundaries for free time.
- Empowering youth and use of the Patrol system reduces the load on Leaders to provide supervision.
- Providing a varied and challenging program prevents youth members getting distracted.

Background

Nearly 50% of Scouts Victoria's safety incidents occur when members are not involved in any specific programmed activity, and a large proportion of those are during "free time". In the last couple of years, we have had a number of incidents where youth members have fallen while undertaking free time, including falling from trees, flag poles, logs, seats, tables, ziplines, etc as well as tripping over obstructions and running into walls and fences. Many free time incidents result in minor injuries, but some, especially when there is a fall from heights, have resulted in hospitalisation and extended injuries.

Free time incidents aren't just safety incidents – there is an increased likelihood, regardless of Section, that unsafe decisions could be made by youth members. This could involve testing boundaries like substance abuse, bullying like behaviour, sexual misconduct and other harmful situations.

What is Free Time

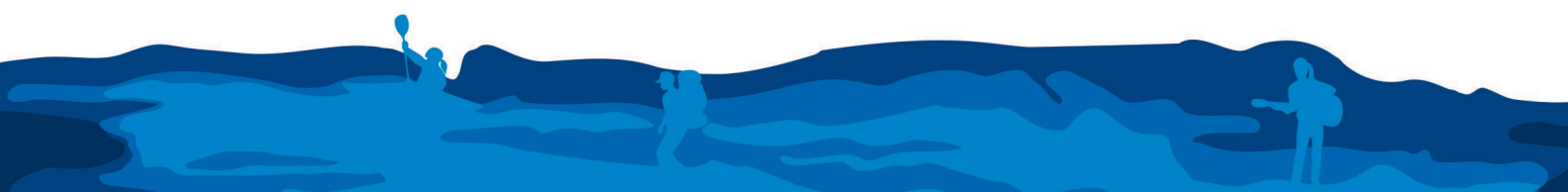
Free Time is a broad term to describe a range of activities that don't fit within the definition of typical Scouting activities. This includes:

- before or after Section meetings;
- periods where Leaders are busy setting up, clearing away, preparing meals, etc;
- designated free-time at the end of a day where no specific activity is programmed;
- in between activities during the program; etc.

This guidance is designed to provide Leaders with some suggestions on how to manage these activities in order to reduce the potential for incidents and injuries, and to provide a balance between under-supervision and over-supervision of youth members.

Directly before and after Section meetings

At the start of a Section meeting, our Leaders are often busy setting up for programmed activities while, at the same time, parents are dropping off youth who are excited to catch up with their friends and play in or around the hall. We might be waiting for other Leaders to turn up and there's often a new member trying out; and at the end of the meeting it's easy for



Leaders to be distracted talking to parents and coaxing the youth members to put things away.

While the Leaders are distracted, free time incidents can occur outside in the Scout Hall grounds. This could be something simple like falling over uneven surfaces or running into obstacles – particularly in winter months when it is still dark. It can also be more serious, particularly around cars during drop-offs/pick-ups, and or falling from heights.

How you deal with this will depend on the Section but be aware of the areas that youth members play in after Section meetings and consider using senior youth members to supervise the junior members.

While leaders are busy

We've all been in the situation on overnight camps when there are times of the day that Leaders are busy – preparing and cleaning up after meals, pitching tents, setting up activities, etc.

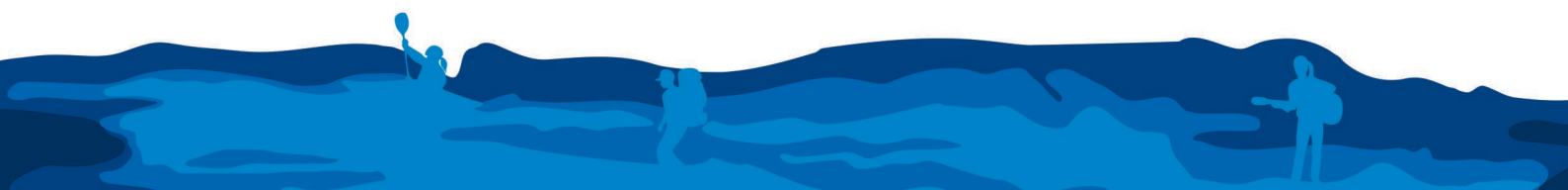
When we are busy trying to get these tasks completed, we might miss the opportunity it presents – how we can best engage our youth members to be occupied. In the case of pitching tents, why are leaders doing this task? Get the youth involved, it may take a little longer, but they will be gaining the skills that is part of their program, and just as importantly, we don't risk time being lost on managing an incident - or worse, serious injuries.

When we get youth involved, remember that younger members can easily get distracted while standing around watching others if there are insufficient tasks for them all to do. Use of the patrol system allows the youth to take responsibility for their own time in assisting with tasks. For younger members, active supervision by leaders may be required at all times.

Designated free-time

After a long day of an active and challenging program, designated free time at the end of activities allows the youth members time to burn off any extra energy and/or relax - this is also a great time for allowing the youth to explore the location. However, there is a difference between free-time and a free-for-all.

- Set clear boundaries about what youth members can do and where they can and can't go - to avoid any of the obvious significant hazards (heights, water, vehicles, etc).
- Think about how to provide indirect supervision but make sure that at least one Leader is ready to increase the supervision if the free time starts to become a free-for-all.
- At the start of activities, Leaders should talk to senior youth members and discuss the boundaries and hazards of the camp site and the standards of behaviour etc. Senior youth members could then convey these expectations in a stand-up discussion to the group or within the Patrol system.
- Empower and remind all youth members to call out behaviour that they don't consider appropriate and provide them with the process to get help if they aren't listened to.



In between activities

It's hard to keep youth members fully occupied all of the time, but they can easily get distracted between activities when there is nothing to focus their attention. This could happen during the running of an activity while they are waiting their turn, while waiting for an activity to be set up, or simply when walking from one activity to the next.

The key here is in the planning of the program – planning a seamless program with clear transition between activities will keep youth members occupied and engaged, which reduces the opportunity for them to become distracted. Some ideas to consider:

- Overlap the setup of activities so that youth members are passed on to the Leader at one activity while the Leader at the previous activity is busy preparing for the next activity.
- Plan the program to be challenging and relevant to the abilities of the youth members to keep them engaged
- Use the Patrol system to allow the youth members to self-manage the transition between activities.
- If down-time is scheduled between challenging activities, provide quiet activities to keep their attention.

For more information or suggestions please contact:

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