

Managing free time during activities

Many of Scouts Victoria's incidents occur during free time and other nonstructured periods. Leaders should be aware of the hazards around the site and set clear boundaries for free time. Empowering youth and using the Patrol system reduces the load on Leaders to provide supervision, while providing a varied and challenging program prevents youth members from getting distracted.

Background

Many of Scouts Victoria's safety incidents occur when members are not involved in any specific programmed activity or are during "free time".

Free time incidents can result in minor injuries, but some, especially when there is a fall from heights, have resulted in hospitalisation and extended injuries. Recently, we have had incidents where youth members have fallen while undertaking free time, including falling from trees, flag poles, logs, seats, tables, ziplines as well as tripping over obstructions and running into walls and fences.

Free time incidents aren't just safety incidents – there is an increased likelihood, regardless of Section, of youth members making unsafe decisions about behaviour or conduct.

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.

This guidance is designed to provide Leaders with suggestions on how to manage these activities 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

The start and end of Section meetings are often busy with set-up and pack-up, and conversations with parents, youth and other Leaders. It can get particularly busy when you have new members starting or visitors to the meeting.

How you deal with this will depend on the Section and the location but be aware of the areas that youth members play in after Section meetings.

- Ensure the youth members know any areas that might be out of bounds.
- At some meetings, where you know there will be more visitors or more to pack-up, consider if you need to have a designated supervisor. This could be a senior Patrol Leader, a youth helper or an adult supporter.
- Consider where you place yourself in the Hall during these times. A visible Leader, even in conversation, can be more helpful than a Leader in the den or kitchen.

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 helping with tasks. For younger members, active supervision by Leaders may be needed.

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 or relax - this is also a great time for allowing the youth to explore the location. However, there is a difference between low-structure activities and no-structure activities.

- At the start of activities, and particularly in a new location, Leaders should ensure that youth members understand the boundaries and hazards of the location and the standards of behaviour. They should explicitly be told about any significant hazards (heights, water, vehicles).
- 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.
- Use your Unit Code of Conduct to empower and remind all youth members to call out inappropriate behaviour and provide them with the process to get help if they aren't listened to.

In between activities

While we don't need to keep youth members fully occupied all the time, 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 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 earlier 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 activities, offer less-structured activities (instead of no-structure) to keep their attention.