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Youth Group Caving

Legal Issues and General Information for the Experienced Caver

Prepared by the Youth Groups Liaison Committee
of the National Speleological Society
and NSS members

Introduction

Make a difference

Have you ever met an ill-equipped youth group in a cave that exceeded the group's skill level? You may have encountered a cave being vandalized by youths who didn't know any better. Do you think caves would benefit from more professionals in cave management and the cave-related sciences?

By working with youth groups who plan to go caving, you can have a positive effect in all of these areas. Not only can you provide a quality caving experience for the youths, but most importantly, you can also instill in them sound principles for safe caving, as well as a good conservation ethic. You can be the one who infuses them with an appreciation for the value of caves and their contents that they will carry with them into adulthood. It is these youths who will be making decisions that will affect caves and cave areas in the future.

A very good way to accomplish this is by working through national youth organizations. Girl Scouts USA, Boy Scouts of America, 4-H, church youth groups, youth summer camps, schools, and at-risk youth groups provide the framework that makes educating young people about caves and caving easier and safer for all.

Some cavers really enjoy working with youth. Guiding a well-trained and well-behaved youth group through a cave can be a highly rewarding experience. For other cavers, being trapped in a flooded cave with no light or food for several days would be far more enjoyable than guiding a youth group. Either way, all cavers can support youth group education, even if they never come in contact with youth groups.

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Educating youth about caves and caving doesn't mean that you actually have to take them into caves. Some youth groups are interested only in learning about caves at a regular meeting. Other groups would be happy being directed to a wild cave tour in a show cave. However, many groups do want to go into a "wild" cave.

Who should read this pamphlet?

This brochure is written for the experienced caver who wants to become a cave guide for youth groups. It does not contain all the information necessary to conduct a safe trip. Cavers leading youth groups into caves should read the following NSS brochures, all of which are available on the NSS Web site: *A Guide to Responsible Caving*, *Youth Group Caving: Information for Youth Group Leaders and Parents*, and *Fragile Underground*. However, the information contained in these brochures will not replace the necessary skills gained from actual experience.

Dangers and inexperience

Caving can be dangerous. Groups that are too large, contain too few adults or experienced cavers, or are led by inexperienced adults compound the hazards that are inherent in caving. The cave guide and youth group leaders should ensure that the trip participants practice good safety and conservation standards.

Starting out

Commercial caves and caves managed by Federal and state parks offer tours and knowledgeable guides. If the youth group has no caving experience, consider starting with one of these tours. Some commercial caves offer wild tours and programs for youth groups who want to have a more adventurous caving experience.

Cave training for youth group leaders

If the youth group leaders are new to caving, consider conducting a trip solely for them, without any youth present. If time and other commitments do not permit this, at the very least be sure to sit down with the adults before meeting the youth group to discuss what they can expect in the cave and what help you will need from them. Teach them how to read a cave map. Let them know specific plans for taking the youth into the cave. Will they be split into two or more groups? Will there be other cavers on the trip whom the leaders have not met? What equipment will the cavers provide and what should the youth group provide?

Youth leader training for cavers

Most national youth organizations offer training for adults who want to work with youth groups, and cavers who would like to take youth groups caving should attend one or more of these sessions before taking youth underground. The training generally provides information about emergency procedures, avoiding potential legal problems, and the organization's requirements for working with its youth groups.

Trip preparation

Group composition

National youth organizations have regulations governing activity age limits, group size, adult-to-youth ratios, and adult leader gender, and these requirements must be followed. However, the risks and obstacles inherent in caving require a higher adult-to-youth ratio than may be required by these organizations. A safe youth caving group includes at least four adults. If an adult is injured, it is necessary for at least one other adult to stay in the cave while an experienced adult caver and another adult return to the surface to summon help.

Group size

Small groups are easier to supervise and cause less damage to the cave than larger groups. Cavers without experience in youth group caving should consider starting with groups of no more than eight members, and include at least three experienced cavers. Factors to consider when establishing group size include the age, maturity, and experience levels of the participants, as well as the nature of the cave. Groups of more than 10 members usually travel too slowly for the trip to be enjoyable or safe.

Include enough adult leaders from the youth group so that the cave guides do not become the disciplinarians. Groups that are composed mainly of children require more supervision than do groups composed of adults. Err on the side of caution; it makes for a safer and more pleasant cave trip.

Choosing the cave

A good cave for novices is horizontal, very stable, not excessively muddy or wet, heavily traveled, and not ecologically sensitive. There should be no risk for falling from any height above a few feet. The trip should not require hand lines, ladders, or other climbing equipment. The cave guides should be familiar with the cave. Save the more challenging and sensitive caves for experienced youth who have shown a dedication and commitment to becoming good cavers. Know the group, know the cave, and plan for a trip that the weakest member will enjoy.

Except for groups composed entirely of experienced vertical cavers, do not visit caves that require the use of hand lines, ropes, ladders, or other climbing

equipment Safe vertical caving requires special equipment, extensive training, and practice within controlled conditions above ground.

Landowner permission

Always obtain the landowner's permission before crossing property and entering a cave. Some youth organizations require this permission in writing. Research the organization's requirements for entering private property, and ensure that these are met. Additionally, always follow the rules and procedures established by Federal and state agencies governing access to caves on the lands they manage.

Trip duration

Novices generally enjoy short trips that do not last more than four hours. Younger or less athletic novices may do best on trips that last no more than an hour or two. Exit the cave soon enough for the youth group to have a rewarding experience. Long trips can be miserable for novice cavers.

Negligence and liability insurance

To be covered by the negligence and liability insurance of national youth group organizations, all participants, including the cave guides, must be registered with the appropriate organization, and each participant must comply with the requirements of that organization. However, registered leaders are not given immunity from lawsuits.

Waivers

A general waiver is available on the NSS Youth Groups Caving Web page. Consult with a lawyer familiar with state liability laws about the suitability of the waiver for your needs, and amend it as required.

At least one week before the trip, give the waiver to the participants and to the legal guardians of the participating minors. Collect the signed waivers before the trip, and allow time to correct problems. File the signed waivers in a safe place.

Orientation and preliminary equipment check

Require trip participants to attend a caving orientation and preliminary equipment check conducted by experienced cavers at least one week before the trip. Refer to the orientation and equipment lists available on the NSS Web site and, if needed, adjust these lists to meet the needs of your trip. Supply copies of the orientation outline and the equipment list to the participants and to the legal guardians of the participating minors. Have the group members bring their equipment and clothing to a meeting prior to the caving trip for an equipment check.

Trip participant medical conditions

Know the medical and physical conditions of the participants before the trip, and ensure that the trip is appropriate for all participants. Anyone taking a medication that causes dizziness or drowsiness, or affects coordination or judgment should not go caving. Most youth organizations require completed health forms for all participants to be brought on outings. Follow the national organization's rules and state laws for carrying and dispensing medication.

Trip participant qualifications

Limit the trip to participants who are members of the organization, attend the orientation and preliminary equipment checks, and return signed waivers. Participants must demonstrate an ability to physically traverse the cave, as well as a willingness to listen to leaders and obey instructions.

Physical contact

Ask permission of youths before giving them physical assistance except in situations of immediate danger. Do not touch certain zones of the body, such as the buttock or genital regions, and the chest area on girls.

First aid

Many youth organizations have specific first aid training and requirements that must be met. Ensure at least one adult in the group has this training and provides the first aid supplies as stipulated by the organization.

Top cover

Arrange for a responsible adult who is not caving to be the "top cover." Provide information on the trip plans, cave location, an expected time that the group will return to the surface, participants' names and emergency contact phone numbers, and phone numbers for the local cave rescue group and the sheriff's office. Discuss what to do if the group has not exited at the stated time.

In the cave

Final equipment check

Conduct a thorough equipment check before entering the cave. Allow only those who are properly equipped and dressed to continue. Plan how to exclude those who do not bring the proper equipment. Distribute a copy of a map of the cave to each adult to carry on the trip.

Underground hazards

Hazards include slick slopes, loose rocks, pits, difficult climbs, deep water, complex routes, and flooding. Attempt nothing that may exceed anyone's limitations. Closely supervise the caving group so that they cause no harm to themselves. Do not use equipment encountered in a cave. Some organizations

require leaders to obtain specific certification in rappelling, climbing, and belaying techniques before using these techniques with youth.

Moving through the cave

Do not assume youth are capable of common caving maneuvers. Climbing, crawling, and route-finding may not be obvious or easy for them. Explain how to overcome obstacles as they are encountered, and assist the youth in negotiating them.

Prepare for the worst

Because young people are not as physically and mentally developed as adults, caving with youth groups presents a higher risk for accidents. Prepare for an incident before it happens.

All leaders should carry the phone numbers of the group's top cover, local cave rescue group, and the sheriff's office. Ensure a first aid kit is brought along that meets the specifications of the youth organization. Be sure blankets or sleeping bags, a more extensive first aid kit, and other equipment used to manage severe injuries are accessible. These should be stored nearby, perhaps in a car.

Cave conservation

Supervision

Closely supervise participants so that they cause no harm to the cave or its inhabitants.

Relief

Ensure that participants relieve themselves before entering the cave and that they not do so in the cave except in containers brought along for that purpose.

Legal issues

In case of an incident

Respond quickly and appropriately to any accident or injury. In the case of an injury that prohibits a caver from exiting under his/her own power, it is generally recommended not to attempt a self-rescue. Instead, stabilize the injured caver, insulate him to maintain body temperature, then exit the cave and initiate a rescue operation. Take notes of actions taken and at what time, injury data, and all other relevant information, then document what happened as soon as the incident is over. Ask others to document what they saw, but do not influence what they write. Never apologize or admit fault for any actions taken. Do not discuss any incident with the press; leave this to the youth organization leaders.

"Reasonable and prudent"

The words "reasonable and prudent" are used in negligence and liability lawsuits. Before embarking on a caving trip, selecting equipment, or deciding on an action, the cave guide must ask, "If a child gets injured as a result of my action, can I defend myself as having been reasonable and prudent?" If in doubt, do something else.

Number of adults

Organizations have requirements for the number of adults who must be present with children, and these requirements must be followed. Most youth groups do not permit one adult alone with a group or individual. Consider pairing cave guide with a youth group leader at all times. This is for the protection of both the youth and the adults, including you.

Insurance coverage and youth group regulations

If a youth organization's regulations are disobeyed, and if an accident occurs, the organization's insurance may not cover the leaders. Research the national and local organization's regulations before taking youth groups caving.

No local group may change its national organization's requirements to make requirements more lenient without jeopardizing legal coverage for negligence and liability.

Documentation of training

Document the participants' attendance at the orientation and equipment check. Record the times, places, and dates of this training, and file with the orientation notes and the signed waivers.

Extended liability

Even when a child sustains an injury and parents decide not to sue, some states allow such children to initiate legal action once they reach their 18th birthday and even for years thereafter. Therefore, maintain waivers and documentation for at least 10 years. Know the appropriate laws in both the participants' state of residence and the state in which the trip is conducted.

Waivers

Waivers may offer little protection in lawsuits involving negligence and liability, however courts have upheld waivers when negligence was not determined to have caused an accident. A properly written and signed waiver supplies proof that all individuals were informed of the dangers and risks inherent in caving. Consult with a lawyer familiar with state liability laws about the suitability of the waiver, and amend it as required. Have both the child and a legal guardian sign the waiver.

Financial compensation

Any fees exchanged in return for using equipment and/or guiding trips, including "suggested donations", may place the owners of the equipment, the cave, and the cave guides at additional liability risk in case of incident.

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