Supervising excursions

Taking children out in the community can be an important part of an OSHC service. Supervision is always important, but supervision outside the normal OSHC setting brings some special challenges if children are to be kept safe. Choosing excursions thoughtfully and carefully is an important first step, making sure that they are likely to be worthwhile and more than just time fillers. It is challenging to come up with excursions that fit the range of ages and interests in most OSHC services.

Following are some suggestions for ensuring easy and effective supervision:

- Set the stage for a successful excursion. Visit the place you are going to, talk to those involved, and make sure that you have covered issues related to safety, appropriateness of the experience, and the match with children’s likely attention span. For example, visiting a place where there is a tour guide who gives commentary can be wonderful, but most of us have had the experience of enthusiastic informed tour guides who go on too long, losing people’s interest and attention. This is especially important when children are involved, and when there is a range of ages. Discuss these issues with people involved. Don’t assume that they know about children.

- Prepare children for excursions, telling them about where they are going and what to expect. This increases their interest and makes it more likely that they will stay focused and with the group.

- Discuss rules before each excursion. Remind why rules are necessary. Allow children to ask questions and tell others who may be new to the service about the rules. If children feel ownership of them and if they think they are fair and understand why they exist, they are more likely to cooperate.

- Pair children or put them in groups of three, with the idea that each is responsible for looking after the other. It may be appropriate to put younger children with older ones, as long as this can be done without the older children feeling burdened by having to look after the younger ones. Giving children the message that they are responsible for looking after each other promotes a sense of community and caring.

- Ensure that you have enough adults. The ratio you need depends very much on the nature of the excursion and may exceed that required in national standards or service policies. An excursion to a large open space where children will be moving around would require more adults than one where children will be in an enclosed space and perhaps even seated (the movies for example). Think ahead of time about whether you need extra adults, and whether you should ask parents or other community volunteers to go with you. It helps if these adults are informed about the excursion, so that they can provide interesting information and not just keep children in the group. Obviously any adults going on an excursion need to be familiar with the rules and guidelines operating.

- Position adults in strategic positions when the group is moving on foot – at the front, at the rear, and beside the group.

- It may seem a small thing, but it helps if all of the adults who are supervising the group are identifiable by the children, for example a hat or brightly coloured T-shirt.

- Whenever you can, break up a big group into smaller groups. This may require more adults but the quality of the experience and the ease of supervision make it well worthwhile. There is little point to an excursion that is dominated by crowd control – constantly herding children from one thing to another and bringing ‘strays’ back into the fold.

- Whenever it is reasonable to do so, designate a place or a person that a child can go if she or he becomes removed from the group.

- Have children wear a badge which includes the name of the service or another means of identification that a child is a member of the group. If they become separated from the group, that identifying information makes it easier for someone to help them.

- Find out where toilets are and establish the guidelines with children about using them alone or going with someone else or the group.
• Think ahead of time about which children are likely to wander. Give these children a special role, for example carrying the snacks or using the map to point out where the group is going next. Ensure that an adult is keeping a close eye, although an unobtrusive one, on these children.

• Assign a staff member to a child who needs supervision because of additional needs or for some other reason.

• Do a roll call periodically, to assure that everyone is present.

• Take a head count periodically, especially with a large group.

It is easy to forget that a modest simple excursion can be lots of fun when it is undertaken with friends and supervised by skilled staff. Don’t overdo it. Don’t get carried away with elaborate excursions to exotic places. A walk to the park can be a great adventure. New places, or even familiar ones, can be lots of fun when visited with friends. Keep it simple. Also avoid making it too long so that children, younger ones especially, do not become too tired.

Questions and reflections
1. Think about successful excursions you have had with children. What was it about it that made it work so well? Can you transfer some of those ideas to other excursions?

2. What are the main reasons that some children don’t cooperate on excursions? What can you do about this without resorting to punishment?

3. Are there some ‘ordinary’ places near the service that it would be interesting to visit with children?

Links to Shared visions
Chapter 5: Relationships, pp. 59, 60
Supervision; pp. 63-65 Helping children learn to guide their own behaviour
Chapter 6: Planning and evaluating OSHC programs, pp. 84, 85 A word about excursions and in-house activities