



YMCA YOUTH EXCHANGES CANADA

Module 5 – Travelling and Hosting



The Government of Canada, through Exchanges Canada, a part of the Department of Canadian Heritage, provides financial assistance for this program. Exchanges Canada also offers information on exchange activities available to young Canadians through the 1-800 O CANADA information line (1-800 622-6232, TDD/TTY 1 800 465-7735, or at www.exchanges.gc.ca).

Canada

Acknowledgements

Since 1994, we have received advice, suggestions and examples from many exchange leaders. We thank them for their support. We also wish to thank our Youth Advisory Committee and our Group Leader Advisory Committee for their invaluable feedback and suggestions.

We would like to thank the Canadian 4-H Council, Experiences Canada, and the many other organizations who contributed.

Revised 2021

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Your YMCA's charitable registration number is 11930 7080.

Workbook for YMCA Exchange Leaders

Module 5 – Travelling and Hosting

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Hosting and Travelling Arrangements

Make Billeting Arrangements

Going through the screening process and keeping up regular contact with the parents/guardians of your group members makes it easy for you to reassure your twin leader that the homes for the twins are adequate and safe. It also reassures your group's parents/guardians to know that the twin group's parents/guardians are going through the same screening process.

Please check with your school board or organizations policies on billeting prior to speaking to your twin. If a common stay is required based on the family needs, please make sure that you are aware of the options in your area and when they are available.

Screen Host Families

Every participant has the right to stay in a safe and secure environment. **For this reason, all participants and host families must take part in a screening process.** This includes group leaders or any other chaperones that will be hosting youth in their home.

Group leaders are expected to ensure reference checks are done with the utmost respect for the families and their privacy while gaining enough assurance that the family will be a suitable host.

Here is a list of forms necessary for billeting:

- **Host Contract and Family References:** Each family will need to sign a host contract. Each family will need to provide at least four references. All references should NOT be family members or related in any way. Suitable people are employers, co-workers, family doctor, teacher, or principal.
- **Alternate Host Contract:** Other community members who are hosting a youth, but do not have youth involved in the exchange, will sign the Alternate Host Contract. You will need to follow the same screening process for them.
- **Reference Interviews:** Complete at least three references for each family. Ensure that the interview and the reference are not the same person. Ensure that each reference

is signed and dated by the person conducting the interview. **As a group organizer, you will approve all families that are hosting and sign off on all references.**

- **Billet List:** The Billet List will contain the names and contact info for each host family, and the names of youth who are staying with them. Each family on the list must be screened. **You must submit the Billet List at least two weeks before your group hosts.**

The forms and templates are found on the group leader website www.yecgl.net.

Screening committee

Getting all the forms filled out and doing reference checks can be a big task. You may want to set up a screening committee.

Two or three other responsible people can help you call references, do the paperwork, visit homes if needed and help you determine whether a host family is suitable. The committee members must agree to keep all the information confidential.

Reasons for denial

Do not accept a family to host if, during your calls, you find reference to any kind of child abuse, violent behavior, alcohol or drug problems or inappropriate behavior or living conditions. You should be prepared to set up a review process for those who might want to question an unfavorable decision.

Steps for screening

1. Ask the parents to fill out the Host Contract and Family References when they fill out the Participant's Consent and Contract.
2. Using the Interviewing references sheet, contact three of the four references for every family.
3. If you think it will help you make a decision, interview the host family at home.
4. Notify the family of your decision. If you decide they are unsuitable to host, notify them in writing but do not give any explanation. We've included a sample denial letter.
5. Complete all the paperwork and keep it safely locked away.
6. Sign the Leader's Acceptance form to confirm that you have screened all the host families and send it to the YMCA Exchange office
7. The YMCA will review and approve the references

Alternate hosting arrangements

It's a good idea to have a plan in case unforeseen problems come up with the billets. Discuss this with your twin leader ahead of time.

Please note that **ONLY** screened and approved families may host a youth. If you need to make an alternate arrangement, the new family will have to undergo the host screening process including reference checks **PRIOR** to moving the youth participant.

As well, under no circumstances can a youth leave the group and spend time with a relative without prior consent and the YMCA notified.

Leader's Billet

Leaders usually choose to stay in each other's homes as well. Discuss it with the other leaders in your group and with your twin to make sure everyone is clear about the arrangements. You may need to prepare your family to host.

Sample Letter of Denial of Host Family

Here's a sample letter for you to use if you find during the screening that you have to refuse a host.

Dear (Name),

YMCA Youth Exchanges Canada recognizes that the conduct of host families must be of an exemplary nature as they are in a position of trust. For this reason, we formally screen all potential host families. Our high standards continue to make YMCA programs safe and successful for young people.

As a result of the screening process, your application, along with others, to be a host family for a YMCA Youth Exchanges Canada Program has been reviewed. We regret to inform you that you were not among those who were selected.

*Thank you for your participation. Sincerely,
(name of group leader)*

Preparing Parents/Guardians

It's just as important to prepare parents/guardians and families as it is to prepare your group members. If your exchange is an intercultural one, parents/guardians can also experience culture shock.

At a planning meeting, talk about how host families can provide a good experience for their twin. Discuss host family responsibilities and some activities the family can do with their visitor. Talk about what kind of supervision they are expected to give. **Share the Host Guide with parents**, which can be found on the Group Leader website. www.yecgl.net

How the home works

With the parents/guardians, develop a list of topics that should be addressed as soon as the twin arrives. Below are topics that could be covered in many homes. Which would be appropriate to go over with a youth from your twin group?

- Washing clothes
- Preparing and cleaning up after meals and snacks
- Using internet, phone, television, radio
- Using kitchen and appliances
- Meal times and food choices
- Observing religious or family practices

Contact the twin's parents/guardians

Some parents/guardians find it helpful and reassuring to introduce themselves to the twin parents/guardians before the exchange. If a parent/guardian is very concerned, you can contact your YMCA Regional Coordinator for advice or have an experienced exchanges parent/guardian call your concerned parent/guardian to answer any questions.

Remind your parent/guardians

Tell your parents/guardians that, if things get tough, not to blame anyone (including themselves). Their visitor is facing a new family, which is possibly very different from their own. It may be the first time the visitor's been away from home. Parents/guardians need to be patient and supportive.

Common Stay Arrangements

Your group may be involved in a common stay arrangement, either as part of the host plan, such as a camping trip or group sleepover, or one that is needed to remove barriers to participation.

Common stays are usually in school dorms, camps or hostels. In general, hotels are not considered because they are expensive and accessible to the public. You have less control over who stays in the hotel.

Before the YMCA will approve common stay arrangements, you have to provide:

- A description of the location, including the facilities, their layout and any risks such as unsupervised pools, lakes or places with liquor licenses. Include a brochure or other print material if possible.
- A list of measures that will ensure the safety of the group members, including how they are to be allocated rooms; supervision protocols, particularly after hours; and procedures to minimize risks.

If you are going to be involved in a common stay, discuss it early with your Regional Coordinator. You will receive a Common Stay Information form to fill out and return.

Your twin leader will also have to sign the form, to ensure there has been clear communication about the arrangement.

If the common stay is part of a request for special measures, you submit the form along with the initial common stay letter and a quote for costs.

Common Stay - General Considerations for Hosting

Location and cost

- Is it easily accessible by transit? If not, consider forms of transportation.
- Is the space bookable? Are we able to book the whole facility?
- What are the check in/out policies?
- How long will it take to get from the location of the common stay to the location of the planned activities? How much will this cost?

Rooms and layout

- How many rooms will you need? Will group leaders have their own room?
- How many people can sleep in one room?
- How will the sleeping arrangements be divided? Who will share rooms with whom?
- How will free time be allocated, and will they be at the common stay site? If not, where? Are they able to hang out in a common area?

Supervision

- Youth supervision while in their rooms and in common areas.
- Will you be able to provide support to your twin group leader with participant supervision in the evenings?

Food

- Where will meals be coming from?
- Are breakfast/meals provided? If so, what's included? If not, have other meal arrangements.
- What (if any) appliances are available? (fridge/stove/toaster/oven)

Policies and services

- Will rooms be cleaned by cleaning staff?
- How does the key distribution work? Lost/stolen keys policy?
- What are their health and safety policies? Who can we contact in case of an emergency?
- Is the twin group leader (or you) able to do an inspection upon arrival?

Common Stay General Considerations for Travelling

Supervision

- Group leaders will be responsible for entire group, this can mean being “on” almost 24/7. Consider how you will support each other so that burnout does not occur.
- Will there be supervision over night?
- How will you avoid burnout if you must share a room with the participants?

Inspection and cleanliness

- What is the state of the site upon your arrival? Are there any visible damages? (Refer to check list on the group leader website).
- Who will be cleaning after your group? How will the space be kept clean?

Before Travelling

What to pack

To make sure your group knows what to pack, ask your twin leader to send you a list of essentials for your visit, especially in locations with extreme climates.

Make a similar list for your twin leader.

Recommend that each person take only one piece of luggage and one carry-on bag. Each piece should be tagged with name and address.

As a group leader, make sure you bring the following:

Make sure you have the following:

- Emergency funds and phone numbers
- Medication for pain relief and to control nausea
- Food or money to buy a meal
- Spare snacks for travel delays.

Your last planning meeting before travelling:


Topics to cover:

- Airplane—expected behaviour, security checks (importance of not joking about drugs or terrorism), what not to pack or carry on, new airline rules, staying together
- Hotel—if staying overnight en route—expected behaviour, acceptable noise levels, importance of not leaving the hotel.
- Carrying an emergency address and phone number slip and emergency money in wallet.

Check whether it's the first plane trip for any of your group members. You may want to keep an extra eye on them.

For a young group

If your group is young or quite nervous, arrange a time for parents/guardians to speak with their youth shortly after they arrive or when they reach their host families. This can help them adjust.



Make sure all group members and parents/guardians have a copy of the host agenda, telephone numbers of the host and the emergency plan. Parents/guardians should be able to reach you and your twin group at all times during the exchange.

Meet with your participants to discuss at what level they need to be involved. Some groups may be able to look after many of the tasks in this section. Others may have one or two items they would be able to take on.

Hosting Your Twin and Travelling

Here are some suggestions to make the most out of the experience and travelling and hosting.

Keep a daily journal

A record of thoughts and impressions can become the basis for discussions about the trip during follow-up activities. Each person can keep a journal, or the group can create one journal by arranging for one person to be responsible for each day of the visit.

Daily check-ins

Touch base for 10 to 15 minutes at the beginning, middle, and end of the day. This gives everyone the chance to talk about any problems or concerns that might have come up. Check-ins also allow participants to reflect on what they did during the day.

Make sure that your group members are able to contact you at all times in case of questions or problems.

Considerations when hosting your twin group

One group had a handout of what group members should remember when their twin group was visiting. Here's what they suggested:

- Ask your twin many times during the day if they are hungry, tired, comfortable, if they need or want anything. Make them feel at home.
- Introduce them to all your other friends and family
- Tell them as much as you know about your home town
- Go to the group leader if you feel any problems developing
- We have many activities planned – please be available to help set up, clean up, or do whatever is required to make things run smoothly
- Have a good time!

When you return home and after your twin group leaders, meet with your group and parents/guardians

How did you like it? What didn't you like? How was the twinning? Check if group members need to talk about some situations that came up before meeting the twin group again. If your group travelled first, review arrangements for hosting the twin group.

Time Together

The time that participants spend together allows groups to learn more about their own community and their twin's community. Each exchange is unique. Here are some comments from group leaders about visiting their twin.

It takes a while

“Coming from a small, isolated town, the students have limited experience travelling and meeting new people. At times they were nervous, uncomfortable and reluctant to participate in some activities that were unfamiliar to them. It took them a little while to feel at home with their twin. By the end of the trip many of these difficulties had been overcome.”

Thank you postcards

“While in Nova Scotia, our students sent post cards to the organizations that hosted our visitors while in Yellowknife. These cards were thank-yous for helping us to host a successful visit, and we felt that it would be very nice for them to receive a card from us while we were away.”

The unexpected part of the experience

“Even if, during the exchange, there are sometimes unexpected incidents, it's part of 'real' life and learning.”

Self-Care While Travelling and Hosting

Downtime

Coordinate with other group leaders and schedule in some down time during the exchange. The idea is you should be able to walk away from the group and be on your own for a little bit. The team of group leaders should decide together on the length of time away from the group, and it should be reasonable and fair.

Give the group downtime

Giving the group downtime throughout the day is a great chance for you to get downtime as well. Chances are the participants will also be wanting down time. Try to schedule down time both with the group and without.

Take care of basic needs

Ensure you get, or try to get, enough sleep, food, and water. This will ensure you have the energy to deal with your group.

Utilize your support team

If you have a team of supporters behind you, utilize them!

Keeping Everyone Safe

Supervising the Group

You're responsible for supervising all group activities. Take an accurate head count at all departures.

Make sure the host parents understand that they are expected to supervise their guests.

If your group is going to have a common stay, you will have to see that they are supervised in the "off" hours.

Use a buddy system

If you're a large group, use the "buddy system." This can help the two groups interact and saves you from having to count heads constantly.

Being accessible

All participants and parents must be able to reach the group leader or a contact person 24 hours a day during both parts of the exchange.

Keeping Paperwork and ID

Make sure that group members travel with government-issued identification and that there is a back-up photocopy of both sides of the document.

Give each participant and each family a copy of the itinerary and the host family's name or common stay, address and phone number before departure, as well as the 24-hour contact number.

Take a copy of the final participant list with you when you travel and leave a copy with the school principal or head of the organization.

Medical needs

Be aware of any medication group members are taking, and make sure they have enough to last for the exchange. Make sure that you have their medical insurance numbers, including photocopies of their health cards, front and back, and are familiar with any medical needs.

If you're visiting a remote community, it's a good idea to forward information on special medical needs to the leader of your twin group. Many communities are served only by nursing stations, and the leader can then talk with staff at the station to make sure the appropriate medications are in stock.

Minimizing Risk

If your group and your twin group come from very different environments, keep safety issues in the forefront. For example, riding a snowmobile or worrying about frostbite may be new to some participants living in southern Canada. Similarly, some groups from rural communities may have members who have never been on a subway or an escalator.

When you do your host plan, identify any activities that may involve risk and make a plan to reduce that risk. For example, if your group is going swimming, make sure you have a lifeguard. Follow your own organization's guidelines when it comes to safety.

The YMCA expects all groups to reduce risk to ensure that exchanges operate safely. The YMCA expects all groups to follow all applicable laws and regulations.

Have an Emergency Plan

You should be prepared to deal with any emergencies, medical or otherwise. Become familiar with YMCA procedures and procedures your organization may have.

You will also have to prepare an emergency plan before the YMCA will make the group's travel arrangements. You will also want to work closely with your twin leader to develop both plans.

Many schools and organizations already have suitable plans that you can use.

An emergency plan includes:

- Contact numbers such as the travel rescue phone line and the YMCA 24-hour emergency number as well as each group's contact information.
- A statement that leaders have shared a copy of the emergency plan with each other and their participants' families.
- A list of who is responsible for the group at different times to give leaders and families clear expectations.
- Details on how the group has prepared to deal with an emergency.
- How to deal with a lost participant.
- How to deal with an ill or injured participant.

- Group contract on behaviour

This plan is included in the Exchange Plan Document and is on the website. (www.yecgl.net)

Talk With Your Parents/Guardians

Parents/guardians may have questions or concerns. At a meeting, go through the precautions you will be taking to ensure the group's safety. Mention any activities that might be considered risky. Remind parents/guardians that they are expected to supervise their guest.

Planning for Safety with the Parents/Guardians

In vehicles

If your visitor is going to ride in or use an all-terrain vehicle, snowmobile, horse, motorcycle, car, truck, etc, make sure your visitor uses the proper safety equipment and the driver has a valid license and insurance for that type of vehicle.

On the water

Anyone going water-skiing, on a boat or doing any other activity on water must wear a lifejacket. Before taking participants on water activities, discuss their level of swimming skills. A qualified lifeguard needs to be present. Make sure that any craft being used meets at least the minimum requirements for safety equipment.

Playing sports

An adult should supervise all sporting activities. Don't let participants undertake high-risk activities like rock climbing, running rapids, bungee jumping or sky-diving.

On the farm

If participants are staying on your farm, you should take them around and show them all the potential dangers. Instruct them carefully if you allow them to operate any machinery. (Any firearms should be locked away.)

In the city

If you are going to be using public transportation, review with your visitor the necessary safety precautions.

In a family emergency

If an emergency means a participant has to return home immediately, call the group leader.

In a health emergency

If a participant is injured, first get medical attention. Next, phone the group leader, who will have medical consent forms for the participant and be able to contact the parents.

Trouble-Shooting

Contact numbers:

YMCA Exchanges after hours emergency line: 647-339-5926

YMCA Exchanges toll free number (business hours only): 1-877-639-9987

YMCA Exchanges Fax: 647-439-4502

UNIGLOBE (during business hours) 1-877- 771-7157

UNIGLOBE after-hours phone: 1-800-206-1595. Quote SOS code 2DJ2.

The hotel can't find your reservation

Ask the desk clerk to re-check the reservation under the following:

- Exchanges Canada
- YMCA
- UNIGLOBE
- The name of your association or school.

Behaviour problems

Problems can be caused by many factors: homesickness, the freedom of the first time away from home, encounters with drugs and alcohol.

Prevention is key. Members sign the group contract, committing themselves to following through on expectations about behaviour and participation before going on the exchange. Sending a participant home early is a last resort.

If a group member has difficulties in the host's home, try to work out the problem with the participant and parents. An open discussion can sometimes help everyone involved become more comfortable with the arrangement.

Crisis at home while on exchange

A prearranged contact person should be available to receive calls in your community and relay messages to the other parents. Determine the seriousness of the crisis with the group member. If alternative travel arrangements are needed, call the Exchange office.

Sickness

In the event of illness or an accident, call the Exchange office (1-877-639-9987) or travel agency (1-877- 771-7157) if you must arrange an early or postponed return for the individual or the group.

Emergency

In a crisis, you can reach the YMCA after business hours eastern time at 647-339-5926. Please use this number only in an emergency.

What to Do in Case of a Travel Delay

Stay calm!

Priority 1 is to visit your airline's customer service desk to be booked on a new flight - make sure you stress that you are travelling with a group of youth.

- Airlines are the only ones who can re-protect (which means to book you on another flight when your flight has been delayed or cancelled). Uniglobe or the Emergency travel assistance line cannot do this.
- Be prepared to split the group. Make sure you stress with whoever is changing your itinerary who are the adults and who are the youth. Make sure there is at least one adult travelling with each group of youth.

If your flight is delayed or cancelled during Eastern Standard Time (EST)

business hours – call your travel agent and your Regional Coordinator AFTER you have spoken to the airline at the counter in the airport. The travel agency will then adjust the rest of the itinerary according to the new travel arrangements whether it be bus, common stay or second airline.

If your flight is delayed or cancelled outside of EST business hours – call the Emergency Travel Assistance line. UNIGLOBE's after-hours number is 1-800-206-1595. Quote SOS code 2DJ2. Please note:

- This is not Uniglobe. This service is a third-party assistance provider but they do have access to your travel information.
- If there is a major event happening (think ice storm), causing significant delays and cancellations, you will likely be on hold for a while. You have the option to leave a message and email the Emergency line – do this. Consider having one leader on hold with the line while you leave a message and then email from another phone.
- You will need to ask the Emergency line to adjust the rest of the itinerary according to the new travel arrangements whether it be bus, common stay or second airline.

In the event of a weather-related delay, it is unlikely that airline will provide overnight accommodations at a hotel. Be prepared to camp out in the airport.

Let your twin or home contacts know when you are now arriving.

- If there is an airport transfer arranged for you at your destination, make sure either your travel agent or the Emergency Assistance Line has confirmed your new arrival time with the bus company.

Always travel with a credit card that has some space to deal with any expenses incurred during a travel delay (meals, possibly accommodations).

Reporting Procedures

The YMCA has a formal contract with Exchanges Canada to deliver youth exchange programs. Within this agreement, the YMCA must inform Exchanges Canada, in a timely fashion, of any factor or event that may affect the program.

Some incidents or accidents may become public knowledge, or of interest to the media, or involve legal action, or parent complaints. Thus, the YMCA must be informed promptly of all accidents or incidents.

If the incident or accident occurs outside normal working hours and it is serious, inform the YMCA immediately at the 24-hour emergency number (647-339-5926).

Exchanges Canada officials may require a written report. Make accurate notes of the incident as soon as possible. If the media is involved, you must submit the report the same day. You must also submit updated reports as information becomes available.

**The Accident/Incident Report is found on the group leader website. (www.yecgl.net)
Submit it, within 24 hours, to your YMCA Regional Coordinator.**

Reporting Abuse or Neglect

Group leaders have a legal obligation to report abuse or neglect.

According to all provincial and territorial child protection acts, the responsibility for keeping our children and youth safe and free from abuse and neglect falls on all adults who play a role in the lives of children and youth, whether on sports fields, in classrooms, or within neighbourhoods.

Any person who has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child or youth may be suffering or may have suffered from emotional, physical abuse or neglect or sexual abuse must report the abuse or neglect to the local child protection agency. A person who has a duty to report shall make the report directly to the child protection agency and not rely on any other person to report on his or her behalf.

The Reporting Disclosures about Abuse or Neglect form is found on the group leader website (www.yecgl.net)

Submit it within 24 hours to your YMCA Regional Coordinator.

Mental Health First Aid

Information adapted from MHFA course originally developed at the Center for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University in Canberra. Published by the Alberta Mental Health Board, 2008.

Group leaders taking part in a youth exchange are responsible for ensuring the youth's safety, and can support youth in a multitude of ways. As such, you may need an understanding of basic mental health first aid actions. It is also important to determine your local school/organization guidelines for a mental health problem or crisis.

What is mental health first aid?

Mental health first aid (MHFA) is the help provided to a person developing a mental health problem or in a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate professional treatment is received or until the crisis is resolved.

The five basic actions of MHFA

1. **Assess the risk of suicide and/or harm:** Evaluate the situation to decide how best to help the youth. It is important to reduce or remove any risks. Do not be afraid to ask direct and specific questions to assess the situation. (Ex: Do you have a plan of what you might do to kill yourself?)
2. **Listen non-judgmentally:** Adopt a set of attitudes and listening skills (verbal and non-verbal) to understand what they are sharing and enable the youth to talk without feeling judged. Remember to stay calm and patient. Ask about what they need, what they are feeling, and what you can do to help.
3. **Give reassurance and information:** Help the youth feel hope and optimism, that there are supports and treatments available, and that they can realize a vision for a better life. Do not assume or make judgments about possible mental health diagnoses.
4. **Encourage the young person to get appropriate professional help:** Help the youth to identify the most appropriate professional service, and encourage them to access that help.
5. **Encourage other supports:** Help the youth find ways to help themselves through self-help strategies or by reaching out to family, friends and other supports. You may also provide resources about local warm lines and crisis lines.

The five actions of MHFA are not necessarily steps to be followed in a set order. Use your judgment and be flexible and responsive to the youth you are helping.

It is important to take appropriate action and arrange for professional help if someone is at serious risk of harming themselves or someone else. This may be a mental health professional, but could include emergency medical services, the police or other professionals.

Supporting a youth through a crisis may be quite scary and stressful. Enlist the help of other trusted group leaders or supervisors.

Ways of recognizing a mental health crisis

This is beyond the normally expected reaction that youth may exhibit taking part in a youth exchange program (such as homesickness and culture shock).

- **Isolation:** If a youth starts keeping themselves isolated from the group and/or peers; refusing to engage in any activities; showing signs that you believe are severe
- **Anger:** If a youth shows signs of tension and hostility towards a real or perceived threat to themselves, their possessions, rights or values, then anxiety is most likely to blame.
- **Personality changes:** Has there been a shift in the youth's way of thinking? Changes are normal but if you suddenly notice an undesired or uncomfortable change in personality, it may be indicative of a serious condition.
- **Poor self-care:** Youth in distress often cannot care for themselves. Are they eating, getting enough sleep, maintaining hygiene?

Lack of sleep may contribute to a mental health crisis, helping youth get enough sleep can help calm and/or prevent the crisis. Ensuring there is plenty of time and space for rest during the exchange may help with this.

- **Hopelessness:** If you notice a youth is expressing a sense of hopelessness that reflects a negative view of the future. They are expressing that they truly believe NOTHING will get better.

*Adapted from: <https://www.sheppardpratt.org/blog/5-ways-recognize-mental-health-crisis/>
Other resources: <https://jack.org/Home>*

Fact Sheet for Youth – Protecting Yourself from Sexual Abuse

Say no

If anyone touches you or invades your personal or emotional space, you have a right to say “no.” Don’t discuss it. If you don’t want to be touched, a loud “No, don’t touch me” is okay.

Be assertive

Let the person know you will tell someone what has happened. However, if you are afraid, look for ways to get away from the situation. Do talk with your group leader.

Travel in groups

Avoid situations where you are alone with someone you don’t know well, feel uncomfortable with or who may try to take advantage of you. Arrange to have someone else around.

Show that you know

Let others know that you are aware of sexual abuse, that you are in charge of your own body, and that you will work to protect yourself.

Nurture supports

Develop friendships that support you. Be a friend to others and value relationships in which you can speak honestly.

Trust yourself

If you have a gut feeling that something is wrong about a person’s behavior, trust that your intuition is warning you.