

What to Do to Prevent and Address Misbehavior on a Mission Trip



INTRODUCTION

Mission trips provide adventure and an opportunity to get a break from life's normal routines and scenery. While many students welcome this change and are eager to bring their best selves to the experience, the combination of unfamiliar surroundings, long work days and poor decision-making can lead to misbehavior in some students. Sometimes this misbehavior disrupts the mission trip experience for the whole group, especially if it catches us by surprise. Yet even our most mature students have their patience, friendliness or kindness tested on a mission trip!

What does this mean for youth leaders? This guidebook is designed to answer that question by drawing from the expertise of TreeHouse and our 25+ years of experience hosting teenagers at YouthWorks mission sites.

This guidebook includes three chapters: Before the Trip, During the Trip, and After the Trip. Preparing thoughtfully and thoroughly can help minimize misbehavior in the first place, which is the focus of the first chapter. If situations emerge that cause significant disruption or distraction, you will gain insight and tools for managing those situations in chapter two. We conclude the guidebook with suggestions for follow-up after the trip is over and your group is back home.

Look for these themes to show up in each chapter:

- Common causes and accelerants of misbehavior
- Importance of clear communication and follow-through on expectations and consequences
- Effective deceleration strategies to limit the impact of misbehavior on the whole group
- Managing students, leaders, and community relationships when a situation occurs

Here are some suggestions for getting the most out of this resource.

- ▶ **Find a study partner.** Invite someone along for the journey so you can process and learn together. Also, communicate the content of this resource to your entire adult leader team so everyone feels equipped to lead effectively.
- ▶ **Take notes.** Even the most seasoned youth worker occasionally faces new challenges, so take notes of your thoughts and questions as you read through the material. This will allow you another way of processing the information and also make it easier to handle situations that arise on the trip. Bring your notes along so you are not relying on memory when something comes up mid-week.
- ▶ **Ask for help.** The crew at TreeHouse did a great job putting this information together, but you may still have questions about what student misbehavior means for your team and your ability to provide leadership. That is perfectly understandable! Don't let it stop you from feeling prepared and empowered to serve the students on your trip. Reach out for help so you can feel more confident in your understanding.

Thank you for taking potential misbehavior of your students seriously by engaging this material. We hope you find it to be helpful, encouraging and practical as you do the amazing work of student ministry.

- CHAPTER 1 -

Before the Trip

Mission trips begin long before your van or bus hits the road on the day of your departure. Forming your team and preparing them for the experience starts to happen months beforehand.

As you read the following scenario, identify details, personalities and circumstances that might signal a need for proactive leadership to address potential misbehavior during the trip.

We had a “Dream Team” of student leaders this year. A small group of these students were almost like interns – we relied on them a lot and they had formed an extremely tight bond throughout our pre-trip preparations.

We had the perfect group of students for the perfect mission trip experience and could not wait to get on the road!

A couple of days before the trip, we talked with the students about social media during the week, acknowledging that it was an important part of their lives but to be careful not to allow it to distract them from the people in the group and the spiritual focus of the trip. Some members of the group had a big argument over social-media a few weeks before the trip (a particular student tends to go too far with banter that is playful until it isn’t), but it all seemed to have settled down. Many leaders are connected to students via social media and hadn’t noticed anything recent that seemed problematic.

A group of students involved in a “Rap Battle” begged us to allow them to continue it through the week and we obliged, as long as they did it privately and not during work time.

While most of the students were familiar to leaders, a handful joined the trip late and missed some of the pre-trip meetings. We were looking forward to getting to know these students during the 20-hour drive to our mission site.

What do you see as potential sparks for misbehavior or challenging dynamics in the group?

What are some specific things that could be addressed before the trip?

How would you describe the responsibility leaders have to pre-emptively deal with causes of misbehavior?

THE RIGHT MINDSET ABOUT MISBEHAVIOR

Society can be quick to label kids as “bad” when they do something disruptive or harmful. Our job as leaders is to communicate just the opposite! Leaders can set the tone that, while every single person is unconditionally loved, some behaviors are not acceptable. Leaders who can help students understand the difference between being bad and making a bad choice will already be well on their way to avoiding misbehavior.

In the above scenario, it seems that leaders might have had unrealistic expectations of the “Dream Team,” assuming they could help to create a “perfect week”. They may even have inadvertently created a clique by investing a disproportionate amount of attention in a small group of student leaders while other students were still virtually unknown at the moment of departure.

As with teenagers everywhere, social media can be like gasoline on a fire, quickly accelerating and escalating relatively small conflicts into dramatic and far-reaching battles. And even if leaders are connected via social media to students, always assume that there is more to any story and be proactive about clear expectations regarding social media use during the trip.

If there are students with a track record of creating drama or causing problems, leaders should take extra care to deepen relationships with those students ahead of time to build a reservoir of trust and connection, should conflict arise during the mission week.

FOCUSING THE GROUP ON A SHARED PURPOSE

Consider the specific objectives for your mission trip experience. For example, your purpose might include one or more of the following objectives: to help immature students grow spiritually, to help entitled teens become less self-centered, to help solidify your group’s culture by working hard together or to expand students’ understanding of the world by visiting a different community.

Clarifying the objectives of your trip will help you clearly communicate expectations to students and help them clarify if this trip will be a good fit. For some students, it might be best if they sit this one out and join your group for a different kind of experience at another time. As the leader of the whole group, if you sense that a student is not ready for the responsibilities of a mission trip, it is best for everyone if you communicate your concerns and decision to not have them participate.

Rules without relationship = rebellion! A core part of any mission trip preparation should be building relationships among everyone on the trip. Include ice-breakers and games during pre-trip meetings and change up group dynamics by pairing students who don’t know each other as well for tasks or prayer times.

SETTING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Every successful trip begins with clear and concise expectations. Teens need to know and agree to the expectations and understand the consequences if rules are broken. Most groups apply their standard guidelines at home to the trip, plus a few more that address the increased risks involved with travel and lack of parental supervision.

It can be tempting to rely on the “common sense method,” where we assume teens understand the expectations instinctively. However, since students come from varied backgrounds, they will approach scenarios with different sets of values.

In the appendix, you will find a sample document titled *Trip Covenant*. This can serve as a starting point for you as you hammer out your group expectations. Before the trip, you will have students help create, agree to and sign a covenant. This covenant becomes the anchor point for any discipline that has to take place on the trip.

During one of your pre-trip meetings:

- Cast a vision for the trip and clearly communicate your primary trip objectives
- Review YouthWorks guidelines and expectations
- Share a sample team covenant and invite students to add any additional items that will help make a great trip
 - For example, they might all agree that public displays of affection shouldn't happen on the trip because it makes others feel uncomfortable.
- Emphasize infractions that will result in being sent home. This might include:
 - Fighting/extreme disrespect towards group members or in the host community
 - Drugs/Alcohol on you or in you
 - Sexual activity

Pro-Tip

Right before you leave for a trip, give students one last opportunity to leave contraband behind without consequences. Say: “Now is your chance to give up any drugs, alcohol, weapons or tobacco that you brought with you, maybe it was accidental, but now is your grace period. If we find you with it on the trip, you will be sent home immediately at your parent's expense.”

Once the covenant is formed, print a copy and have students sign it. Then make sure to bring the signed covenant on the trip and consider posting it as a reminder of your shared agreement.

Setting these expectations for the trip will make or break how you deal with discipline issues as they arise. Providing this leadership beforehand, instead of coming up with solutions on the go, you will have already established a baseline of how discipline issues will be handled if and when they come up.

- CHAPTER 2 -

During the Trip

Before we jump into the specifics of what to do when, we want to emphasize that our response to misbehavior must be grace-centered and shame-free. We cannot make a student feel that their behavior has ruined the trip or that they are failures. Many teens do not understand their identity and already believe lies about who they are. They might not understand that they are God's dearly beloved children (no matter what!) and that God will never turn away from them.

Even though we may be angry with a teen, we can never speak destructive words into their identity. We have the privilege of helping teens renew their minds to the truth of their extreme value to God and the relentless love and presence of the Spirit in their lives.

It is with this approach that we can address teens in the middle of their misbehavior and continue caring for them after returning home. We can remind them that God loves them and we can be the agents of God's love in the moment. We can help them feel heard and valued.

CONNECTING THE DOTS OF MISBEHAVIOR

Students misbehave for a reason, so rather than just seeing the behavior, we need to stay curious by asking, "Why is this student misbehaving?" and "What is the pay-off?"

Psychologists have identified eight common goals that motivate students to misbehave. The following chart outlines these goals and suggests helpful responses to reorient students towards behavior that is better for them and consistent with the team covenant and shared purpose of the trip.

GOAL	PAYOFF	EXAMPLE BEHAVIORS	CORRECTIVE MEASURES
Excitement	Adrenaline and dopamine rush	Avoiding routine, seeking exciting activities	Seek to understand, encourage the positive and help develop healthy alternatives
Comfort	Stress relief, endorphins	Cutting, masturbation/sex, excessive sleeping or technology use	Seek to understand, encourage the positive and help develop healthy alternatives
Escape	Altered state, endorphins, stress relief	Hallucinogens, excessive technology use	Seek to understand, encourage the positive and help develop healthy alternatives
Attention	Being seen and heard by others	Clowning, mischief, unique clothing style, neglecting chores	Respond quickly, use nonverbal communication to express love and care, don't acknowledge
Power	Feeling of superiority and control	Aggressiveness, disobedience, stubborn resistance	Seek to understand, give choices (not orders), avoid fighting without giving in
Helplessness	Give in to sense of inferiority; no expectations from others	Quits easily, avoids trying	Seek to understand, don't coax or show pity, arrange small successes, don't do for teens what they can do themselves
Revenge	Retaliation for perceived hurts	Rudeness, violence, pouting, passive-aggressiveness	Reestablish relationship, exercise patience, use logical consequences, do not hurt back
Peer Acceptance	Sense of belonging	Insatiable appetite for peer acceptance	Seek to understand, encourage the positive, help establish healthy peer connections

While each goal has a different payoff and different behavioral symptoms, you will notice a trend in how leaders can respond – **relationship building!** Leaders can listen with grace and patience, collaborate with the student to find alternatives, and empathize without condoning misbehavior. This framework allows us to see beyond the behavior to the hurt beneath and come up with a strategic, meaningful response.

RESPONDING TO MISBEHAVIOR

Pray

When disciplining a student who has misbehaved, the first step is to take a quick moment to pray. The Holy Spirit knows what the student needs and will guide you in the best way to proceed.

Separate

It is usually helpful to get the student or students away from the group. If there is conflict between two or more students, it is helpful to send each student away with a different leader. It is important to ensure the safety of the whole group while you are addressing the conflict among the small group of students, so take precautions if you sense that the conflict could escalate to violence.

Calm

If you address a teen's misbehavior and they ramp up into an extreme state of emotion you will need to help them regain composure before you can have a meaningful conversation. Start by walking with the teen and modeling calm body language and speech. Walking will allow excess energy to be used and they will naturally begin to follow your emotional lead.

Some students will be open to breathing exercises (breathing in for 4 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, out for 4 seconds and hold for 2 seconds) while others will only want to express their frustration in words or through their body language. Do not take offense to what they say and do not try to argue a point. Try to calmly repeat back what they are saying to let them know that they are being heard.

The best thing you can do is be present and allow for the emotion to dissipate over a period of time while keeping them safe and away from the group.

Listen

Once they are calm enough to have a conversation, ask some open-ended questions to help students verbalize what they are feeling, such as:

- Can you help me understand what happened?
- How are you feeling?
- What are you thinking?
- What do you think we should do from here?

Do not make any promises to the student but let them know that you will be discussing the situation with the other leaders and you will decide how to best move forward. It is easy for a student to turn inward and get angry at themselves for their behavior or turn outward and blame others or make demands. It is important to remain non-judgmental as you hear them out. Let them know there will be consequences decided by the leadership team.

Decide whether it is safe and wise for them to return to the group or if they should hang out with an adult leader for longer to allow time and space for things to calm down.

Plan

Next, work with fellow staff and adult volunteers to figure what happened by gathering information and then quickly working together to create a plan about the discipline strategy and how it will be communicated to the student.

This is where the rubber meets the road! If you have prepared well, students and parents have already seen the trip rules and consequences so any discipline should not be a surprise. If you have told them and the group that there are consequences for certain behavior, you must follow through. To maintain the safety of the group and for the development of the misbehaving teen, you must follow-through. It's not easy but it will add credibility to your leadership and allow God to work in a transformative way in the lives of teens.

As you plan your discipline strategy, consider these three perspectives:

- What will lead to this student's growth while keeping them safe?
- What will lead to the group's growth while keeping them safe?
- What will help my staff members to grow in their leadership?

EQUIPPING SUCCESSFUL LEADERS

While your attention can easily get swallowed up by the misbehaving teen(s), it is important to check in with the whole leadership team and make sure they feel equipped for leadership through these challenges. They will process the situations in their own ways but need to trust your leadership and know that you have their backs.

Take the time to check in with your leaders to see how they are doing, listen to their concerns and pray together. Do whatever you can to create a sense of unity so the whole team feels supported and they know they are not alone. For those directly involved in addressing the misbehaviors, make sure they get extra support and empowerment.

GROUP DYNAMICS

One student's crisis can quickly lead to large group chaos—gossip, jealousy, anger and frustration can quickly become toxic. Try the following strategies to keep negativity from spreading.

Call out offenders quietly. If a student or group of students are causing tension and discord, pull them aside. Call them out and cast a vision for them to become encouragers rather than destroyers.

Have a group meeting. With the permission of the anxious student, it might be necessary to bring the group together and address the issues you're seeing. This meeting should not be about the struggling student, but rather about the behavior of the group. Using encouraging language, try to help everyone focus on supporting one another and building community.

Have students pray. It's hard to hold a grudge against someone when you're praying for them. If you sense the other students are feeling negatively toward the struggling student, pull them aside to pray for their teammate.

As you consider your team, are there proactive measures you can take to address potential misbehavior?

Are there people you can talk to for help with ideas and strategies should misbehavior occur on the trip?

Consider any questions you have and take steps to discuss those thoughts with a mentor, peer or supervisor.

- CHAPTER 3 -

After the Trip

The trip is over! Sort of.

The travel and different routines are in the rearview mirror, but the impact of the trip will stick with your group for a long time – and that’s a good thing!

When discipline issues arise on a trip, we learn something about everyone involved. We learn how they react to discipline, their guiding beliefs and values, and how they treat others. Draw from the mission trip experience to make inroads toward engaging team members in these important conversations.

Prior to debriefing with others, take time to consider your own thoughts, feelings, insecurities, leadership qualities and reflections about the trip, including situations of misbehavior, but everything else, too. Take care to address any lingering negativity or frustration before inviting others into conversations about the trip.

DEBRIEF WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Anticipate the possibility that several people and groups might need post-trip follow-up, including teen(s) who needed to be disciplined and their parents, adult leaders, other teen participants and their parents and your supervisors.

Remember, the goal of discipline is transformation and growth, so make sure to relationally pursue the disciplined student as soon as you can once you return home.

In all conversations, make sure to:

- ▶ Listen attentively to concerns
- ▶ Respect thoughts and feelings
- ▶ Affirm your commitment to the safety and support of all participants

Here are some guiding questions as you debrief with different groups. Remember to approach all conversations with grace, patience, courage and transparency.

Debriefing Yourself

- *What was I feeling in the situation? What about now?*
- *What did I do really well?*
- *What can I be thankful for about what happened?*
- *What would I handle differently next time?*
- *Recognize God's grace, love and compassion toward you and others. Don't beat yourself up for mistakes made.*

Debriefing with Your Staff

- *Upon reflection, how are you feeling about what happened?*
- *What did we do right as a leadership team?*
- *What could we have done better as a leadership team?*
- *Pray together*

Debriefing with the Teens (assuming the crisis spread beyond the individual teen's misbehavior)

- *Share a favorite part and a difficult part about the trip.*
- *What did you learn because of the situation we experienced?*
- *Who were you proud of during the trip?*
- *Is there anyone you need to apologize to for your actions or attitude?*
- *Pray together*

Debriefing Parents

- *What have you heard about the trip and what are your concerns?*
- *Explain the situation factually and unemotionally*
- *Explain the measures you and your staff took to handle the situation*
- *Take responsibility for mistakes you or your staff made (without assigning blame)*
- *Affirm your care for their teens and your commitment to their safety and growth*
- *Pray together*

Even if debriefing conversations are open, honest and positive, it is common for residual effects of the challenging scenario to arise in the weeks and months after the trip. You will need to find a way to continue to listen and affirm students without unnecessarily dragging out a situation that has been fully and adequately addressed. The best way to invite confidence and trust in your leadership is to follow through on commitments to all of the stakeholders as you move forward in ministry.

Students who made poor choices on the trip, or who were affected by poor choices of others, will need ongoing attention and nurture in the weeks and months after the trip. There might be embarrassment, regret, broken relationships or fear of rejection in the minds and hearts of students, presenting an opportunity for leaders to demonstrate forgiveness and encouragement while also holding teens accountable for their decisions and behavior.

This attention does not necessarily need to come from you, but you can support other adults who are taking an intentional role to invest in students. You can also challenge student leaders to set a tone of acceptance and contribute to creating a grace-filled environment.

Despite whatever challenges your group experienced due to misbehavior, you undoubtedly have much to celebrate! Your leadership in focusing on the positive will be important as your group shares memories and stories of the mission trip experience.

Thank you for investing in your ministry and your mission trip by reviewing this guidebook. We are hopeful that you will bring excellent leadership to difficult situations that may arise and are committed to learning alongside you as we strive to serve leaders, students and communities with excellence.

APPENDIX A

Sample Trip Covenant

We are so excited to have you on this trip and for what God is going to do through this experience. To ensure that we all have a great trip we ask you to agree to the following:

1. I understand a goal of this trip is for all participants to develop a deeper personal faith in Jesus Christ. I will give my all to engage in what God is doing in my life through this trip.
2. I understand this trip is about loving our neighbors. I will do my best to have a positive attitude in my service and avoid engaging in anything that would distract me (i.e. romantic relationships, drama, fighting, sexual activity, etc.).
3. I agree to follow all of YouthWorks rules and instructions from their staff.
4. I will participate in all pre-trip group activities. ***(if applicable)***
5. I will complete all pre-trip study and homework assignments. ***(if applicable)***
6. I will follow the direction of trip leaders before and during the trip.
7. I will make sure I have all necessary supplies before the trip departure.
8. I will not bring or use any drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes while on the trip.
9. I understand that breaking any of these rules could result in me being sent home at my family's expense.

Name: _____

Date: _____

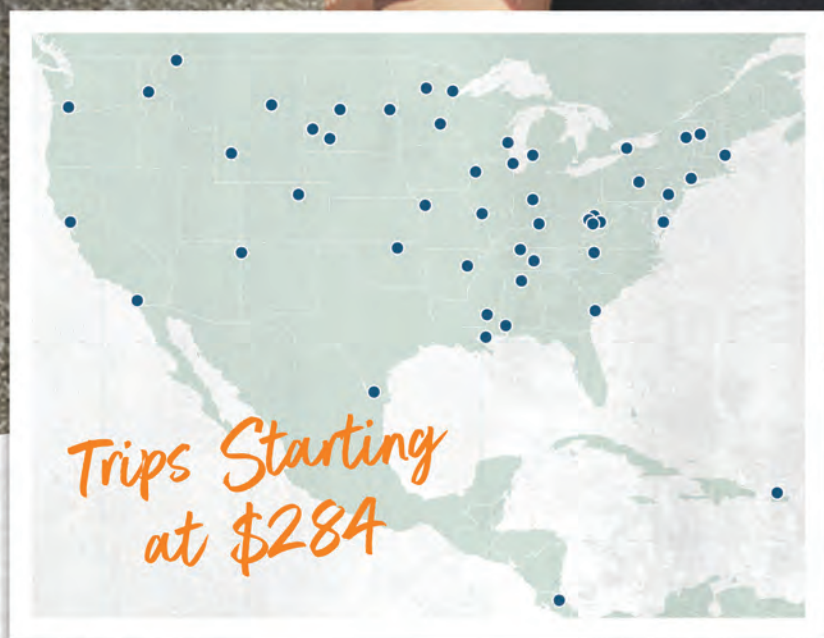


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