UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
HORACE M. ALBRIGHT TRAINING CENTER
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# INTERPRETING FOR CHILDREN

A recognition of the simple fact that the children of today are the adults of tomorrow is essential to the future effectiveness of the National Parks. The habits and interests nurtured by the youngsters who visit the National Parks today will become vitally important as they become adults. It is especially important to help these young people to gain an appreciation of the values that the National Parks preserve and interpret.

The way toward this goal has been paved by experts. In the last 30 or so years children have developed a peculiar kind of sympathy for wild creatures and nature through the efforts of Walt Disney and others. All manner of creatures, including ducks, mice, and woodpeckers, have slowly developed real character through the antics of Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, and the redoubtable Woody Woodpecker. Certainly Smokey the Bear is human in the minds of many young Americans.

There is great value in this kind of anthropomorphism. These young people begin to realize, perhaps subconsciously, that animals lead interesting lives in many ways paralleling human behavior. Thereby, animals become something of value rather than a nonentity or a target.

Donald Duck and Smokey Bear are a start. The excellent work with youth groups of the National Audubon Society and many of our state and county park systems has brought sound nature study programs to many young people. Cook County, Illinois, Dade County, Florida, and the National Capital Parks provide fine, specialized nature service. Also, Yosemite, Lassen Volcanic, Rocky Mountain and other National Parks have specialized programs for youngsters as do many historic and archeologic sites throughout the Nation.

Much has been learned concerning interpretive techniques effective with young people. Much remains to be learned. Here are a few considerations that merit thought and implementation:

First of all, children do not like to be told orally or by more subtle means that they <u>are</u> children. Evidence of this is found in the many games that they play. Normally they assume the part of an adult whether it is a nurse, a mother, a jet pilot, cowboy or Indian. The interpreter should realize this fact and profit from it. He should

work with children as if he were working with adults--adults with a limited vocabulary and experience, but unlimited imagination, energy, and enthusiasm. Complimenting youngsters by treating them as adults can be most effective. Conversely, the fate of the interpreter who tries to place himself on the child's level may be rather disastrous. To use baby talk, to enter into the games of children or other similar pitfalls leaves a distinct impression in the young mind. It is an impression that this uniformed man, whom they had admired as a rough, tough woodsman, or something similar, is not a he-man at all. Thereby, the awe, interest, and advantage that the uniform normally provides in young minds is lost. The ranger becomes just another teacher or parent in the minds of the youngsters.

A pitfall that easily can be avoided involves referring to the youngsters as children. To many young minds this is insulting. It immediately spotlights their immaturity, an immaturity they try to forget. Use of this word at the beginning of a guided trip can alienate and lose the interest of the group for the remainder of the trip. Why not say, "fellows and girls," make them feel grown up, and avoid the pitfall.

Let the youngster feel that he is important and a real part of the guided trip, talk, or museum presentation. The senses of a child are keen. He has a questioning mind. Let him touch, smell, and feel the objects being discussed. A boy or girl long remembers the feel of a snake, wet frog, the fur of a mouse; the odor of a stinkbug or skunk cabbage; or the taste of pemmican. He may not <u>like</u> the sensation, but he remembers it more keenly than the description of a thousand words.

Also, it is important to ask questions, get responses, and present problems. Perhaps you can use the youngster to help guide the trip, to discover the unusual and to present his beliefs concerning the phenomena under consideration. And whether it is a guided trip, talk, self-guiding trail or a museum exhibit, it should tell a story. The fascination of young people for a well told story is widely known. If presentations become a mere inventory of facts, then attention can be most ephemeral. Rather, we should present facts and concepts in story fashion to effectively maintain the interest of the youngsters in the deer mouse, the forest, or the Civil War battleground. The story must not be a last minute simplification of a talk or guided trip that has been used effectively many times with adult groups. If it is, probably for the youngsters it will be pretty drab. To be truly effective the program must be planned and tailored specifically for the young mind. Careful consideration must be given to the pragmatics of that which works, and that which does not capture the imagination of the youngster.

In many words, all we are saying is that to deal with young people effectively you must not treat them as children. You should let them participate actively in the planned function, tell a story, and do not destroy the "Park Ranger Image." The image that you create in a young mind may persist to our advantage into adulthood.

Here are some other considerations that may prove helpful when dealing with youth groups.

1. If possible, get to know the teacher or leader ahead of time. Find out what is desired both in general content and available time for the presentation. If the group is large (more than 20 youngsters) have a teacher bring up the rear to prevent straggling.

2. At the beginning of a guided trip advise the group of what is expected of them. Be pleasant but firm.

3. Be the leader logistically and orally.

4. Deal with rowdyism quickly and firmly. Do not lose the interest and confidence of the group by excessive harshness or by being an ineffectual leader.

5. If rain or other weather conditions force the cancellation of a guided trip, have a substitute indoor program available.

6. Do not let hero worshipping little folks monopolize your time to the detriment of the overall group.

7. Provide a safe trip for your group. Carry a small first aid kit and avoid dangerous situations as presented by traffic, lightning, cliffs, poison ivy, etc.

8. Do not tell the group in advance that, "we will see a deer." Let these things come as surprises. Youngsters love surprises. They resent being told that they will see something and then the animal, or whatever, does not materialize.

9. Be alert for the unexpected and capitalize on it. The unexpected can add real life to your planned presentation. To ignore the chickaree scolding overhead and to continue talking about the early settlers is a mistake. The interest of the group is with the squirrel and you might as well turn your attention to it. Young people and adults relish life and motion. You should not ignore the important unanimated stories, but you should capitalize on life and motion as it appears.