



# SYTA

The Voice of Student & Youth Travel®

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**STUDENT & YOUTH TRAVEL**

# **SAFETY RESOURCE GUIDE**

**PHASE 1: AUGUST 2015**

## SYTA SAFETY COMMITTEE'S MISSION STATEMENT

**“DISCOVER, DEVELOP, PROMOTE, AND IMPLEMENT** best practices in student travel safety that enhances SYTA’s positioning as the **“VOICE OF STUDENT TRAVEL SAFETY, WORLD-WIDE.”**

## SYTA SAFETY STATEMENT

SYTA is dedicated to the continuous enhancement of Student Travel Safety. We share best practices in an effort to enhance the overall safety of all student travelers. SYTA is committed to raising members’ awareness of the latest safety technology advancement and practical training. SYTA’s continued involvement in legislation supports these goals. Our unwavering commitment to safety will solidify our position as the leader in safe student travel.

## OUR PURPOSE STATEMENT

This guide has been developed to provide SYTA Tour Operator members with ideas for addressing many of the challenges associated with traveling students and youth. This document is not intended to be a set of rules and procedures but intended to provide thought-provoking ideas and concepts that may be helpful in the development of a Tour Operator’s own operating and risk management procedures tailored specifically for their organization and client base. Ultimately, our goal in providing this guide is to help improve student travel safety.

## METHODOLOGY

In an effort to support the industry as it continues to expand and professionalize, the Student and Youth Travel Association (SYTA), began the process of developing a guide to support its membership. SYTA solicited feedback from members and industry specialists in order to identify effective practices and concerns related to student travel safety. This document is a culmination of those efforts and represents the most respected practices in our industry. The guide is organized in the same manner a Tour Operator might plan for a trip: pre-trip, the trip and post trip. Comprehensive preparation in advance of the trip, combined with the meticulous execution of adopted protocols while traveling, and the customer-focused follow-up upon a group’s return, are critical to the overall success of any trip.

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## RISK MITIGATION & MANAGEMENT

The best way to reduce risk of unwanted events on a trip is diligent preparation. Once systems and procedures are in place, they can be monitored for success and enhanced for future trips. The following section outlines areas to focus on prior to the start of any trip:

### **a** Supplier Inspection List

Tour Operators should develop a checklist of the most important aspects of any supplier and then inspect suppliers on a regular schedule to ensure they are in compliance with the requirements outlined on the checklist. Some areas of focus on the checklist could be:

- » Check for a valid business license.
- » Obtain a copy of your vendor's insurance policy and ensure coverage is in place during the trip travel period and that your business interests are covered by the policy.
- » Obtain copies of any release forms participants must sign prior to taking part in an activity provided by the vendor. Understand the date in which the documents need to be returned to the vendor prior to the activity commencing and ensure all participants understand the deadline.
- » Review the vendor's emergency/crisis plan and ask how supplier employees are trained and kept up-to-date on the plan.

### **b** Activities Inspection Form (*ropes courses, rafting, challenge course, etc.*)

- » Complete a walkthrough of the facilities for an activity. Note equipment or facilities issues that could result in a problem or injury.
- » Many activities require inspection by local authority or professional organizations. Request the most recent inspection report. Note any repairs or deficiencies noted in the inspections and remediation and question the vendor on progress made to correct the deficiencies.
- » Confirm the vendor has a safety program, who is responsible for it, and that a trained program specialist will be on-site during your visit.
- » Determine if the activity requires a liability release form be completed prior to participating in the activity. If so, who will ensure the parent or legal guardian has the opportunity to review the form in advance and sign it on behalf of their student traveler.

### **c** Emergency Contact List

- » Maintain an updated contact list for each vendor and validate the phone (cell phone, text and email address) contacts annually.

### **d** Discipline Guidelines

- » Establish a list of behavioral expectations of all participants of a trip and the steps that will be taken when these expectations are not followed. Ask your tour organizer to include your guidelines along with those they establish.

### **e** Staff Orientation

Travel seasons are cyclical and staff involved in travel programs change over time. It is important to have a consistent orientation program for all staff annually.

- » Develop a curriculum for your program that involves day-to-day activities, emergency policies and staff behavior expectations. By doing so, you will go a long way towards ensuring everyone understands the most up-to-date policies and procedures.
- » Develop a similar orientation program you or the tour organizer can present to travelers and adult traveling chaperones.

### **f** Chaperone Handbook (*includes policies and procedures*)

- » Many SYTA members have developed travel handbooks outlining policies and procedures to be followed while traveling with a group. Handbooks can be distributed to chaperones in advance of a trip. This practice allows chaperones the opportunity to review policies at their leisure prior to the trip. They may also refer to the document during travel to help clear up any confusion that may arise between chaperones, tour guides, and or travelers.
- » Consider adopting a policy of asking chaperones to sign a document stating they have received and understand your policies and procedures.
- » Develop an orientation curriculum for chaperones that can be reviewed prior to a trip. The orientation can be delivered in person, in writing or in the form of an on-line training video for chaperones who come from other areas.

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## **G Incident Report Form**

Proper documentation of incidents that arise during a trip is critical. By doing so, a Tour Operator may see trends develop prior to a significant problem surfacing. Capturing the facts surrounding an incident when it happens provides important information to be used to prevent an accident from happening in the future. Accurate documentation can also be beneficial later if an incident escalates or if a complaint is filed regarding the incident. When completing an incident report, it is important to document only information that is factual. It is not appropriate to document opinions or conjecture of what might have happened. It is important to remember that any incident report can be used in a court of law if an incident escalates to that level. An incident report should address at least the following subjects; and document basic information relevant to the incident such as;

- » The date, time and location the incident took place.
- » Names of all people or agencies involved.
- » Names and signed statements of all witnesses to the incident.
- » Pictures of the incident scene if appropriate to the situation.
- » A section where the individual involved can describe what happened in his or her own words.
- » If more than one individual is involved, a separate incident report should be completed for each person.
- » A signature line so the person completing the incident report can sign the report verifying that the information in the report is accurate to the best of his or her knowledge.

## **H Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs for parents and students)**

- » Consider adopting a process and format to provide advice to parents and students of important facts surrounding their trip. A comprehensive student handbook is a great tool. For shorter trips, a FAQ list might suffice.
- » This format can also be used to update families on the positive elements of a trip before, during and after the trip.
- » A closed Facebook page open to only the travelers and their parents or legal guardians can be an effective tool to accomplish trip updates. Consider developing a secure social media plan to communicate with travelers. Social media can be one of the most effective ways to communicate with the travelers' families back home.
- » Never post personal information involving any single traveler on a social media site. Updates on health and safety related incidents or disciplinary activities should be handled confidentially with the family members involved.

## **I Identify Health Professionals and Facilities in Traveling Locations**

- » Although experiencing a serious medical event during a trip is unlikely, it is important to plan ahead and know where the closest emergency medical facilities are in the area where you will travel.
- » Develop a plan in the event a traveler needs to see or stay overnight in a medical facility. The plan should answer the questions: "Who will stay at the hospital and who will supervise the group?"
- » Have a plan in the event a student needs to return home early due to illness, behavior, or other reason. Prior to a trip, ensure you have a list of all contact information for parents, guardians and emergency contacts (grandparents, etc.).
- » Determine if the medical facilities accept insurance cards or will they expect to be paid directly. Clarify, in advance, who will be responsible for the payment if the traveler does not have the funds available to cover their medical services and, if needed, what method will be used for reimbursement after the trip.
- » When traveling internationally, determine in advance whether the medical staff speaks English in the region you will travel and, if not, who will serve as the interpreter for the student and accompanying chaperone or staff member.

## **J Background Checks**

School teachers are required to complete and submit a background check on a regular basis as a qualification to teach. When other adults are recruited to assist with chaperone duties, they may not complete a background check. Background checks are a simple and reasonable way to help ensure no person with a criminal background has access to students traveling on a trip.

- » Consider requiring a background check on all adults who have direct contact with student travelers on your program.
- » You may also want to require a background check on any adult traveling as a medical aid for a student on your trip.

## CRISIS AND INCIDENT MANAGEMENT AND RESPONSE

We live in world where consumers are increasingly aware, lawyers and families are more litigious and the media are increasingly willing to expose any weakness in an organization or a product. A Tour Operator in the midst of a crisis cannot completely control all these factors; however, with sufficient preparation and effective planning, the Tour Operator can understand and mitigate some of these risks. Planning, though critical, is not the only component. Training, conducting drills, testing procedures and providing additional external resources are other important functions.

It is more critical than ever that all Tour Operators have a formal and effective crisis response plan. In addition, more and more school districts and educators are requiring proof of an organization's crisis plan prior to selecting a travel professional. Having an effective crisis plan in place prepares an organization to deal with the worst-case scenarios, which makes handling the day-to-day illnesses or student behavioral issues, much less challenging. Effective crisis response plans typically focus on three core topics, pre-crisis, the crisis period, and post-crisis recovery.

## PRE-CRISIS

This stage of the crisis plan incorporates all aspects of development, planning and training necessary to be prepared for any emergency situation deemed to be a crisis, or problems considered as having the potential to damage the health and well-being of travelers and/or the credibility or reputation of the organization.

## THE CRISIS PERIOD

This stage requires rapid response, calling upon all the resources that your organizations will have put in place during the pre-crisis phase. Important to this crisis period is a communications process that recognizes the interests of all stakeholders including:

- 1) How to communicate with travelers.
- 2) How to communicate with schools.
- 3) How to cooperate and communicate with authorities.
- 4) How to communicate and support parents.
- 5) How to communicate effectively with the media.

## POST-CRISIS/RECOVERY

This phase can vary in length, and includes all the aspects of restoring normalcy to the operation, as well as the reputation of the organization. It is important to debrief with all crisis response members after training or an actual crisis to review the actions that took place, the role of each of the individual support team members and any opportunity to enhance the plan based on the experiences gained.

## HEALTH FORMS AND THE MEDICAL CLEARING PROCESS

The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) was put in place to ensure Americans with disabilities are not discriminated against including having access to the same travel opportunities any other traveler would have who does not have a disability. The list of covered disabilities protected by this Act continues to expand requiring Tour Operators to stay up-to-date on the current laws and requirements of this act. More information on the ADA can be obtained at <http://www.ada.gov>. It is important for each Tour Operator to have adequate knowledge of any pre-existing medical condition of their travelers prior to a trip. The purpose in collecting the medical information is not to disqualify a traveler from participating; the goal should be to make reasonable accommodations if needed unless:

- 1) Making the accommodation would fundamentally alter the nature of the program or experience.
- 2) Result in significant difficulty or expense.
- 3) Place the safety of the traveler or any other member of the trip at risk

In order to obtain this important medical history, a tour operator needs a system be in place to collect pre-existing medical information in advance of a trip from

the trip organizers, the travelers, or the travelers' legal guardians if the traveler is under the age of 18. Collecting pre-existing health information needs to be consistent for all travelers and therefore it is recommended a standardized health form be developed for this purpose within your organization.

- 1) The medical history collection procedure should apply whether the tour operator is providing the supervisor or just making the travel arrangements for a group.
- 2) The pre-existing conditions that should be disclosed on a health form may include:
- 3) Any history of an acute medical condition such as asthma, heart condition, etc.
- 4) History of seizures or epilepsy.
- 5) Mobility limitations.
- 6) Severe vision impairment (not corrected with glasses or contacts).
- 7) Severe hearing impairment (not corrected by hearing aids).
- 8) Diabetes, (Type I or Type II).
- 9) Psychological conditions such as depression, mood disorders, anxiety, eating disorders, etc.
- 10) Any known behavioral conditions such as ADHD, etc.
- 11) All prescribed and over-the-counter medications the traveler uses.
- 12) A parent or guardian's authorization for prescribed or over-the-counter drug use during a trip. A chaperone or tour guide should never provide medication to a student traveler unless authorized to do so by the legal guardian.
- 13) A listing of all diagnosed allergies and if it is a life-threatening condition.
- 14) Any dietary requirements or requests.
- 15) Does the traveler have insurance and, if so, what are the policy details.
- 16) If a traveler discloses any of these health conditions, the tour operator should consider requiring an authorization form from the traveler's medical provider that states the physician's approval of the traveler participating fully in the program. In the event the physician provides the approval with limitations, the operator will need to determine if the program can be altered to accommodate the special request.

## OTHER IMPORTANT HEALTH FORM SUGGESTIONS

- » Consider using a health history and medical form and keeping it on file as the law might require.
- » Maintain a copy of each traveler's health insurance information until the claim period as expired.
- » Be aware that some state laws require tour organizers maintain preauthorization forms from parents or legal guardians authorizing student travelers under the age of 18 to take prescription and over-the-counter drugs.
- » Some state laws require tour organizers to secure and dispense all prescription drugs.
- » Encourage any travelers that have a life-threatening allergy to travel with at least two doses of an Epi-Pen available at all times.

## THE HEALTH INSURANCE PORTABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACT OF 1996 (HIPAA)

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) is an important act for all Tour Operators to understand. Although HIPAA laws are intended for organizations who charge for medical services, such as hospitals and medical professionals, there is a great deal a Tour Operator can learn from these laws regarding the protection of confidential medical information. Although HIPAA does not have enforcement authority over a Tour Operator, there are civil rights laws that protect student travelers' rights to privacy. It is important to share traveler's personal medical information and medical history only with someone with a specific need to know. **For example:** It may be appropriate for all supervisors on a trip to be aware that a student has Type I Diabetes so that they can be alert to symptoms that would indicate low blood sugar level.

## RISK MANAGEMENT

Risk management is a two-step process—determining what risks exist during a trip and then mitigating those risks in a way best suited to the student travelers and your organization’s objectives. Our goal is to offer suggestions for areas that a Tour Operator should give thought to having policies and procedures in place to reduce the risk of an unwanted event. This list is not intended to be all-inclusive; it is a starting point to enhance the safety of every trip.

### **1** Hotel Safety Orientation

Providing a hotel safety briefing to travelers after check-in can serve multiple functions. First and foremost, it demonstrates that the travelers’ safety is of high importance to your organization. Topic to include during the safety briefing may include:

- » Evacuation procedures in the event of a fire.
- » A reminder not to use elevators during an evacuation.
- » Room numbers of the chaperones in the event a student needs to contact them if a problem arises.
- » Confirm the chaperones contact information.
- » Confirm a meeting area located a safe distance from the hotel to gather during an evacuation.
- » Advise students to keep their room key next to their bed so it is accessible in the event they need to leave the room in an emergency.

### **2** Swimming Pool Policy

In addition to the swimming pool policies of a given property, additional procedures should be considered and adopted by Tour Operators, such as:

- » A process to ensure the pool area is safe and has the appropriate safety equipment.
- » An approval form signed by each traveler’s parent or legal guardian that gives permission for the student to participate in swimming activities.
- » A policy requiring supervision any time a student traveler is allowed to participate in a swimming activity.
- » Clear guidelines addressing if the student travelers are allowed to swim without a certified lifeguard.
- » Guidance for the chaperones when no lifeguard is present at a swimming location and the tour operator allows swimming in this circumstance.
- » A determination if all chaperones are required to be first aid and CPR trained.

### **3** Free Time Policy

Student travel programs are typically very busy by nature leaving little free unscheduled time. At the end of a day, or when at a hotel in the evening, there may be some short period of time when there could be an opportunity for students to explore the surroundings with or without supervision. When developing a Free Time policy, at a minimum, a Tour Operator should consider the following:

- » Establish a minimum number of students required in a group when traveling through a hotel or event property without supervision. The buddy system can work well for hotels when students are asked to travel the property with an assigned partner. At other venues, larger group sizes may be needed when venturing away from supervision.
- » When students leave a hotel for any reason, consider establishing procedures to identify where they plan to go, a process to check them out, and then check them back in. Ask the students to keep the hotel location and name with them at all times. Make sure at least one member of the group has a cell phone and contact information for the chaperone.
- » Considerations should be given to different age groups. It may not be appropriate for elementary and middle school students to have unsupervised time. Free time policies should be age appropriate.

### **4** Hotel Room Checks

- » When staying in hotels, consider establishing curfews based on age groups to ensure students get the rest they need to enjoy their trip.
- » After all students return to their hotel rooms at the end of a day, a procedure should be in place to account for each student. It is important to actually see each student during these checks to ensure they are safe and ready for bed.
- » Room checks are a perfect opportunity to share plans for the next day and to determine if any student needs anything.

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## **e Meeting Points**

- » At each venue visited, establish a meeting point in the event a traveler is separated from the group.
- » Establish an emergency meeting point outside the venue in case the venue is evacuated.
- » Physically show the group members the location of the meeting point so there is no misunderstanding.
- » Based on the age of the travelers and, if it is appropriate, allow them to tour the venue in pairs or groups, confirm the meeting time, and that each group has a means to track time, i.e., a watch, a phone with a clock, etc.

## **f Student's and Key Contact Cell Phone Lists**

When a travel group first comes together, it is important to collect the phone numbers for each traveler that has a cell phone. It is also important to make sure every traveler, regardless of whether they have a cell phone, has the phone contact information for the chaperone and tour guides. In the event a student is separated from the group, this is a quick way to find them and reconnect them with the group

## **g Walking as a Group**

Walking on streets with students can be challenging. Especially when you have a large group that can spread out over a large distance. Developing a procedure for chaperones to follow can be very helpful in reducing the chance of a problem. A typical policy might include such things as:

- » Chaperones should always station themselves at the front, back and throughout the group whenever possible. This allows the chaperones to lead in the front while keeping an eye out for any stragglers in the rear.
- » When gathering as a group or when walking on sidewalks, attempt to keep your students to one side so the group does not block the sidewalk or path for others.
- » Try to keep students at least five feet from any active roadway or curb when possible. In the event a student bumps another student, the extra distance from the road may help to avoid an accident.
- » When traveling in a crowded area, stop often and account for every traveler to ensure no one has become separated from the group.
- » Consider adopting a count off system whereby each traveler is assigned a number at the beginning of a trip. Practice counting off frequently so each traveler memorizes their number. Counting off is an easy way to confirm if any member of the trip is missing.

## **h Regular Staff Meeting**

In order to avoid unnecessary problems during a trip, it is a good idea for the staff or chaperones, if more than one, to meet on a regular basis. Nightly meetings are a good way to reflect on the day's activities and to preview plans for the coming days. During the meeting, the group may discuss issues such as:

- » Review of the current day's activities including what worked and what did not work.
- » The next day's itinerary and any special clothing considerations for the travelers.
- » Any student behavioral or disciplinary issues the team is dealing with.
- » Any other topic related to the management of the trip.

## **i Cell Phones, MP Players, and Other Electronic Devices**

Most student travelers today have a high level of experience with electronic devices such as cell phones, tablets and computers. Traditionally, using a phone while someone was talking would be perceived as rude. Today a traveler may be sharing the experience and information they are receiving from their tour guide real-time with friends and family on a variety of social media sites. There are venues where making and receiving a phone call is inappropriate. Having clear guidelines in place and communicating to students when it is OK and when they should set their phone to silent, is important. It is equally important to understand when it is safe and appropriate for student travelers to wear headphones or earbuds.

### **STUDENTS USE THEIR PHONES TO:**

- » Check the time.
- » Take pictures.
- » Videotape.
- » Use as a GPS device when the phone is equipped to do so.

- » For entertainment purposes on long bus rides with chaperone's approval.
- » When sick, so he/she can keep in contact with family.
- » Communicating with friends back home about the wonderful time they are having.

**IT MAY BE INAPPROPRIATE for students to use their phones or head phone/ear buds while:**

- » In a theater or during a scheduled program.
- » While a chaperone or tour guide is speaking.
- » While walking with a group when the student needs to pay attention to their surroundings.

**CELL PHONE SUMMARY**

It is important to understand as a Tour Operator, student travelers need time to address their social media communication needs. If you do not plan time into the schedule for this important function, the students will find a way to fill that need. Chaperones should be encouraged to plan "social media breaks."

**Motor Coach Safety**

**HERE ARE SOME TOUR OPERATOR MOTOR COACH, policies you may want to adopt:**

- » Build relationships with bus companies built around student tours and their idiosyncrasies.
- » Develop a list of preferred drivers with extensive knowledge.
- » Understand the mandated service hours and how they apply to student groups.
- » Develop knowledge of resources available to research charter companies such as the safer website.
- » Develop a policy to check the safety record of your bus companies.
- » Provide materials to group concerning bus safety. Loading and unloading, etc.
- » Build a database of appropriate drop-off and pickup areas in each city.
- » Build and Manage relationships between guides and Bus Driver.
- » Develop a system so your tour organizer has availability 24/7 to you in the event of breakdowns, traffic, etc.
- » Understand the of risk management issue associated with student group travel. Provide adequate insurance.
- » Be constantly aware of local, state, province, and federal laws.
- » Develop a policy to check the safety record of your bus companies prior to contracting services. The U.S. Department of Transportation's Safety and Fitness Electronic Records (SAFER) System is one option at <https://safer.fmcsa.dot.gov/CompanySnapshot.aspx>. Users can search by DOT Number, MC/MX Number or Company Name.

**STUDENT BEHAVIOR ON THE MOTOR COACH, policies you may want to adopt:**

- » Everyone should be respectful of the bus driver as he/she is an integral part of the team.
- » The chaperone should meet the driver and find out what his/her rules are for the bus, then share that information with all travelers in the group.
- » Instruct students to follow all safety instructions provided by the bus driver.
- » Remind students to wear seat belts if supplied on your bus.
- » Remind students to remain seated while the bus is moving.
- » Do not use "risk seats" or seats without another seat in front of them if they do not have seat belts.
- » Point out the emergency exits if not covered in the driver's safety briefing.
- » Baggage, handbags or back packs should not block the aisles or stairwells.
- » No heavy luggage should be stored in the overhead racks.
- » Never leave valuables on a bus.
- » If possible, try to keep an open seat near the front of the bus for students feeling ill or nauseous.
- » Understand the mandated service hours and how they apply to student groups.

## GENERAL

### **a** Post-trip Customer Satisfaction Survey

Consider a survey for your clients to ask how they enjoyed the trip. This is also a great opportunity to seek \ safety feedback pertaining to the trip, vendor, or site-specific feedback.

### **b** Document Retention and Storage

It is important to have a formal process for the retention and storage of documents related to a student's travel. It should include which documents can be stored electronically and which original documents must be retained, and for how long. If you do not have a formal policy for document retention and storage in place, we encourage you to seek legal advice on the subject.

### **c** Conflict resolution

SYTA members strive to resolve all disputes and concerns between its company and its clients. It is important to resolve disputes in a timely fashion to reduce the possibility of the situation escalating.

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

This guide is the first phase of developing a comprehensive guide that provides effective practices for our industry. Our goal is for SYTA members to share their knowledge and experience with us through a process that maintains the integrity of their company's best practices yet helps SYTA develop a common core of standards for our industry.



