

Chaperoning at Walt Disney World: A Parent's Guide

by Teresa Weddelman, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Your child brings home a permission slip for a field trip (band trip, baseball tournament, Grad Nite, etc.) to Walt Disney World. You fill in your child's name and basic information. Then comes the next line, "Would you be willing to help chaperone?"

For just a moment, you think it could be fun, but you quickly decide, nope - the responsibility, lack of sleep, time off work, not to mention embarrassing my child... but then, you reconsider for one more second. The experience may be magical! Next thing you know, you've checked "Yes." What next?

Even before the bags are packed, your "job" begins. Attend any informational meetings your trip coordinator schedules. Maintain an open line of communication. Assistance can be offered via telephone, note carried by your child, or e-mail.

But what if you have never been to Walt Disney World? Should you check "no?" Of course not. You don't need to have a visit to Walt Disney World under your belt to be an "expert." There is a wealth of information available to help prepare you for the trip. Disney offers a free video, the internet has numerous sites, and there are guidebooks galore. PassPorter is the best.

Look over maps of the parks. Disney offers a set of free maps to all the parks on their website. Become familiar with the lay of the "World." Check the menus for each of the restaurants at ALLEars.net so you can recommend the best burger, pasta, and salad place at each of the parks (we found those were the staples of our teenagers' diets).

The director will usually give you a list of students going on the trip. Grab your child's yearbook and study the faces that go with those names. It is always nice to be able to use the student's names when you are on the bus, passing in the hallway, etc., and when they know that you know who they are, it is a bit harder for the students to misbehave. Most of us know our children's friends, but at a large school, it is very difficult to know everyone. Just take a quick peek each night before bed and before you know it, you will be able to call everyone by name.

Tuck in a few extra snacks. (The night before we left, we made little "Mickey Mix" snack bags for the kids - Mickey pretzels, "Minnie" marshmallows, M&M's, peanuts, Cheerios, etc. We put about a cup of

mix in Disney treat bags. Even though the kids on our trip were in their late teens, they still got a kick out of the treats. And what teenager do you know that doesn't like food?! When you have a bit of doubt as to what is going on behind that closed door, those treats are a great way to open doors. And after they have been dropping a couple bucks at a time into vending machines for snack-size bags, they will appreciate it even more. It won't appear that you are checking up on them, but you will know what is happening. Of course, even without treats to distribute, if you have any doubts at any time, don't hesitate to knock and ask a question. As a chaperone, it is your responsibility to be sure they are safe and following rules.

It is wise to pack a bag of little extras -- band aids, ointment, sunscreen, safety pins or a sewing kit, duct tape, sanitary items, etc. If you are a chaperone that can help the students out in a pinch, they will soon be looking for you whenever they need help. As they are getting patched up, they often will let you know if anything else is bothering them. Sometimes there is a student who is homesick or having trouble coping with a friend. It gives them the opportunity to have a bit of one-on-one time with a caring adult.

I also drop a couple of Disney DVDs in my bag for the drive. The students usually pack the movies they would like to watch on the bus, but we have had problems with the ratings on the movies. Disney films are usually G or PG and appropriate for everyone. They may groan at a "kiddie" movie, but as they watch it, they become quite attentive. And a few Disney cartoons can lighten the mood when they are getting cranky.

While you are on the trip, be prompt. It is tough enough waiting on dawdling students, but when they wait on a chaperone, it is even worse. Plan on being everywhere 15 minutes early. Have a few Disney trivia questions handy for the students who arrive early. A small piece of candy or gum make great prizes. Follow the schedule of the person in charge.

Don't hesitate to correct bad behavior. If you nip a student early on for small problems, they don't turn into big ones. They realize you will not be letting them get away with bad behavior and they usually respond in kind. It really helps if the person in charge has great control in the classroom. If you see bad behavior, give the student a reason why they can't do it - I find their response is much better. Instead of saying "Get up so that lady can sit down," say "That mother will have a hard time holding her little girl when the bus starts moving. Why don't one of you let her have your seat?" Of course, it works best if you set a good example and offer your seat first. I notice after I give up my seat, the

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students are pretty quick to catch on and almost always look for someone to whom they can offer their seat. Don't permit line jumping. We usually keep the students with us for a while when we arrive at a park (before letting them loose). After we have shown them how to use FastPass, they feel like they have an upper hand on the other park guests, so they're less likely to jump the lines. We explain that if they want to ride with their friends, they can let other families move ahead of them, and wait until they are back with their friends. The students appreciate photos of their entire group of friends. When you see a group, even if it isn't your assigned group, offer to take a group photo for them.

The trip will be tiring. Be sure you catch up on your zzz's and be well rested prior to the trip.

Armed with this advice, go ahead and check the "yes" box. You'll have a great time and make some great memories with your child(ren) and their friends!

About The Author: Teresa Weddelman lives in Ohio and is looking forward to chaperoning her high school choir's trip to Walt Disney World in March 2008.

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