

# **THE ANDERSON PARK DISTRICT LEADERSHIP TRAINING COURSE**

*A Preparation for Tweens Entering the World of Junior High School*



***Ohio Parks & Recreation  
Awards of Excellence  
Program Award  
Category 12  
Teen Programs & Events for Ages 12-18***

**OPRA ANNUAL AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE  
AWARD NOMINATION  
Program Award - Category 12**

*THE ANDERSON PARK DISTRICT'S  
**LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM***

**Purpose:**

In Anderson Township, all graduating 6<sup>th</sup> graders must leave the security of the elementary school setting they've known all of their educational lives and enter {drum roll, please} 7<sup>th</sup> grade! For many, it is the most significant transition they've experienced up to this point. There's an entirely new building, new classmates, new expectations, and a new set of challenges. Almost everything will be unfamiliar to these "little fish" as they leave behind their familiar ponds and progress to the much bigger pools of junior high and high school. To help them prepare, the Anderson Park District has developed The Leadership Training Program.

While classical school curriculum focuses largely on the "3 R"s: reading, writing and arithmetic, the Leadership Training Course is designed to be an action-oriented program to enhance personal and physical growth. The training course gives children the tools to be more successful within the world at large. Focusing on group dynamics, the tweens learn about each other and discover new things about themselves regarding interpersonal communication, teamwork, acceptance of other's ideas, responsibility to the group, problem solving, and trust. Groups and individuals learn to overcome almost any self-imposed perceptions of their capability to succeed and, in turn, are able to transform limitations into abilities.

Following the adventure-challenge activities is a period of conscious reflection on the experience and the application. The reflection carries the learning experience beyond the present moment. The intention is that by reflecting and applying the lessons, a positive change may result within both the group and the individual that is carried on throughout other endeavors in life. Specifically, as the tweens enter junior high school.

**Description:**

The program caters to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes within the Township's elementary schools. Classes of 20-28 tweens spend 2 – 3 hours at the Jason W. Hunt Outdoor Leadership Training Center at the Beech Acres Park Arts & RecPlex. Beginning indoors, the group embarks on a series of Adventure-Recreation Programs (i.e., learning by doing with reflection), featuring low element initiative activities.

Park staff serves as facilitators to nudge kids out of their comfort zone by creating a supportive and safe environment that prompts the tweens to try new roles and skills they might otherwise avoid or resist. For each adventure-activity, the tweens must work together, take perceived risks (both emotionally and physically), communicate effectively, and trust one another in order to reach the group's activity goal. They must do all this while also following the program's rules (see page 5) if they are to achieve

success as a group. The Leadership Training Program is cumulative, so once an initiative is reached, the group moves on to another, more challenging initiative until eventually the group proceeds to the outdoor low elements challenge course for the conclusion of the day.

The specific goal for the tweens is for them to achieve success on each initiative. Success is measured by being able to move on to another initiative. By advancing, the group has demonstrated that they followed the rules, worked together as a group, and maintained safety. If not, the group has to repeat the challenge until success is reached.

An important part happens after the program: The Debriefing. The Debriefing is a session of systematic questioning which eases everyone into a discussion about what occurred during the activity and helps the students understand the significance of their actions and behaviors.

The What?

This part uncovers what happened during the initiative, what made them successful and what were the difficulties.

The So What?

This part focuses on the meaning for them, as individuals and for the group.

The Now What?

This is the process of taking the lessons and reapplying them to other situations – real life situations – such as the transition into junior high school.

While no two groups will come out of the program having had the same experience, every group will have learned valuable life skills!

**Planning & Measurable Goals:**

The APD developed The Leadership Training Program specifically for the unique needs of our local 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The impetus to begin the program came from a parent participating in a separate teen activity with APD staff. As a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in one of our local schools, she expressed to us an urgent need for a program to better prepare her 6<sup>th</sup> graders to make the transition into a new school and new climate. The APD embarked on this type of programming through training received in adventure recreation at the Ohio Parks & Recreation Association annual conference and through advice from park and recreation professionals in Ohio – specifically from Dave Herpy, a man who has extensive knowledge and experience regarding adventure recreation administration. Mr. Herpy is currently a Recreation Specialist for Lake Metro Parks.

After developing the many partnerships necessary to get this program off the ground, the APD began to research and develop unique and challenging initiative activities. Soon, the APD was hosting its first Leadership Training Program with tweens from Wilson Elementary School! During the fall of 2005, and as word-of-mouth spread about this program, the Anderson Park District worked with more classes within 2 local elementary schools. The popularity of the program was immediate and the overall program goal eventually became to engage all local 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes from the six local schools.

**Community Activation and Resources Used:**

The Recreation Staff at the Anderson Park District could not have developed this training without several partnerships. The first partnership involved the Forest Hills School District. They helped to spread the word about the program and encourage other 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes to participate in the course. The course location itself was also made possible through partnerships. Beech Acres, The General Protestant Orphans Home, afforded us the means to utilize their outdoor low elements challenge course facility. For the indoor portion of the program, The Jason William Hunt Foundation allowed us to use their facility to conduct The Leadership Training Program. This foundation supports Experiential Training and recently created a Training Center complete with a rock climbing wall.

The program also benefited greatly from the resources available through OPRA and the training received in adventure recreation at the Ohio Parks & Recreation Association annual conference. And, as mentioned earlier, the program became an immediate success due in large part to the time and resources provide by Dave Herpy. Because of OPRA and Dave Herpy, we did not have to figure out how to successfully conduct this program alone. Instead, we were able to quickly respond to a community need with a quality program. The development of the Anderson Park District's Leadership Training Program is another example of how the willingness to share ideas, materials, and helpful tips makes park and recreation professionals so great!

**Challenges:**

I suppose imitation is the best form of flattery. We received our first indication that the program was popular when teachers, whose classes had just completed the course, began sharing the initiative activities with other teachers. While we were excited to have other teachers expose their students to the activities, we encountered a challenge when classes would attend the program and already be familiar with an initiative. It was a challenge because one of the most crucial aspects of the activity for real learning to take place is that the students cannot know the outcome or how to successfully pass through the initiative.

We didn't want to stifle the sharing; that would be in direct opposition to achieving our overall goal of preparing all local 6<sup>th</sup> graders for junior high school. However, we wanted to ensure that all of the classes that participated in the program were exposed to new initiatives, so we adapted by developing more initiatives and having them ready – equipment and all – in the event we were faced with that challenge. And, an added benefit to being flexible is that the facilitators stayed fresh and excited due to the variety of initiatives they could implement.

Breaking through preconceptions, especially regarding individual students' abilities and behavior can also be a challenge. Early on, we encountered students and teachers who would 'inform' us to 'watch out' or 'beware' of a particular student. We found that by creating a supportive atmosphere and not knowing a particular student's background would draw out never-before-seen behaviors and abilities. Teachers and students would

be surprised to see the student considered the shyest person in the class take over a primary leadership role. In one session, teachers were biting their fingernails in anticipation as to how “the class brute” would behave in the session. Turns out he surprised everyone by, under his own compulsion, taking one of his mildly disabled classmates under his wing and helping her successfully complete the activity. It’s a challenge to have students and teachers chuck their preconceptions at the door, but by making an effort to have them to do this, the session and the lesson learned from it is often greater.

### **Summation and Specific Measurable Results / Benefits of Established Goals**

This year, the APD accomplished what it set out to do when we were first approached about developing a program to better prepare 6<sup>th</sup> graders for the transition into junior high. The success of the course has encouraged us to reach further and to adjust our goal to include all the local 6<sup>th</sup> grader classes throughout the Township. Within the next year, that should be no problem as we now have teachers requesting multiple sessions!

As more and more classes complete the course, the students continue to comment on how cool the sessions are. Word is spreading. The course is ‘tween-approved’ ‘teacher-approved’ and school district supported. While it is difficult to measure the impact the course will have on the tweens and its long-term effects, it appears to be making a difference. In the Debriefing section, many tweens comment that the course has positively changed them. Others state that they learned something new about themselves and/or their classmates. The teachers have said that after each session they feel they know their students better. The teachers have also mentioned that they have seen a marked improvement in how the students work together in groups.

APD staff can see the results too. Right in front of their eyes, the facilitators witness the students applying what they learned in a previous initiative to the next, more challenging initiative. Every time the students successfully complete another initiative, they are demonstrating better communication skills, teamwork, acceptance of other’s ideas, responsibility to the group, problem solving, and trust. If how the students have responded to the course is any indication, we feel that these ‘little fish’ will be able to more easily swim through the unfamiliar waves of the big pond that is on their horizon.

### **Synopsis:**

To enter the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, all 6<sup>th</sup> graders must leave the security of the school setting they’ve known all of their lives and enter a new building with new classmates, new expectations, and a new set of challenges. To help them prepare, the Anderson Park District has developed The Leadership Training Program where tweens learn about each other and discover new things about themselves. They learn interpersonal communication, teamwork, acceptance of other’s ideas, group responsibility, problem solving, and trust. There is a period of reflection that carries the learning experience beyond the present moment by applying the lessons to other endeavors in life and, in turn, better equipping the tweens to succeed at the junior high level.

## **Low Elements Initiative Challenge Example**

### **Frogs on Lily Pads**

In a dramatic fashion, the tweens become 2 families of frogs, trapped on an island with an active volcano. Each frog family must get all of their family members off the Island of Doom, the lava-lurking, burning island (one end of the gym, behind the black line of the basketball court), to the Island of Hope, a new island off in the distance (the other end of the gym, to the other side of the black line of the basketball court). In order to be successful, the entire family must make it to the Island of Hope without touching the water. Residing in the treacherous waters between the islands are snapping turtles (APD staff, and the teachers) that eat any frog that touches the water (gym floor). Each family of frogs gets a particular number of lily pads, which keep them safe from the snapping turtles. Each lily pad is a 2' x 2' foam square; 12-14 frogs get 4 lily pads with which to work. If any frog family member touches the water at any time, the entire family must return to the Island of Doom and begin again. The families get 2 minutes to strategize and come up with their family name.

The kids usually figure out that they need to move as a group and put 4-5 frogs on each lily pad, then pass the last pad up, without touching the "water". The kids are very concerned about the other family, and sometimes so much so that it is detrimental to their own progress. At no point in our directions do we tell the 2 families that it is a race or a competition. The only goal is to successfully get their family members to the other island. This activity can be very frustrating for groups with too many leaders. Groups who choose to leave family members behind always result in "facilitator intervention" because the snapping turtles will say the island has erupted and those remaining family members burned up, therefore, the family members who went on ahead have to come back. The family members who are told to stay behind with the promise that the other family members will come back for them, usually are pretty unhappy, sometimes actually upset and this opens the door to the student leaders needing to consider the emotions & well-being of the other members. Once the families figure out a system and get about half way, they usually become distracted and too confident, and then someone falls. This yields a great opportunity to discuss the monotony of some projects, but that perseverance and staying focused is key to accomplishing a task, even if it's boring. The kids also have to get into each other's personal space and accept other's ideas. By this point in the program, the kids understand that the commitment they must have to each other can result in wonderful outcomes on the outdoor, low elements challenge course.

# *The Five Finger Rule of Conduct*

## **1. Safety**



Safety is the number one priority!

## **2. Be Positive**



The second finger held up next to the first finger illustrates support of one another. The point is further emphasized by stating that if the first finger is taken away, this signals a put-down. Maintaining a constant, positive, supportive atmosphere is an important part of the Leadership Training Course rules!

## **3. Work Together**

Three fingers form the letter "W" which stand for "Work Together". Cooperation is essential to successfully completing the initiatives!



## **4. Watch Out For The Little Guy**



The "pinkie finger" is considered the smallest and weakest finger on the hand. The Course's motto is to watch out for the little guy by helping the shy, embarrassed, scared, etc.

## **5. Have Fun**



The thumbs-up sign means relax, let loose and have fun!