

Organizing Children's Activities

A System for Children's Officers to Maximize Fun and Minimize Burnout

By Dame Aoife Finn of Ynos Mon

How do I go about planning Activities Now?

One of the most common ways for planning children's activities is for the officers to go through the following sequence:

- Get an idea or inspiration for an activity for a certain event.
- Gather materials
- Make a rough schedule; assure there will be tables and chairs.
- Show up and hope like heck that
 - You get enough help or volunteers
 - You have a decent location at the event (accessible to parents and bathrooms)
 - You have enough and not too many or too few children to work with, of the right ages and interests for the activity planned.

Such a sequence is guaranteed to leave you exhausted at the end of the day. By your second or third event, you are convinced that your group is taking advantage of you, that the parents are taking advantage of you, and that you are expected to be the child-minding drudge for every event with little or no thanks at the end of your term. You might even demand that every parent take a turn at the children's area. Only a few will. You'll end up very frustrated.

In short, we're talking about burnout, the biggest foe of Children's officers. It does not have to be that way. The method above is very wide spread. In fact, I used it myself for a long time. Mostly it is the first resort of children's officers because they are familiar with it from Scouts, Church groups, Civic Organizations, etc. It works well for those groups because they only entertain the children for a short period of time. We in the SCA however sometimes have those children all day, and we often see those children over and over again in the course of years. So, like all other areas of our SCA children's lives, Children's Activities should be coordinated to meet the specific needs of the group you're serving, AND they should meet your needs as well. Only then can you plan the activities around what you've learned.

How do I know what those needs are?

Children or Youth Officers need to think about the needs of the whole group. For instance, do you know:

- How much help you are likely to get at events?
- How and where the children's area is situated in relation to the rest of the site?
- How involved parents and other adults will be in children's activities?
- How many children you can typically expect at certain types of events in your area?
- What the children's age ranges are likely to be (and if you're serving those age ranges)?
- What sorts of things those kids like to do?
- What you need to do at the event besides help run children's activities?

These are all important questions, and ones you'll need the answers for before you can plan what activities to offer. Borrowing an idea from a wonderful friend of mine, Mistress Graidhne ni Ruadh, I sometimes gather the parents of my Barony together to ask them what they want to see and to ask the kids what they want to do. It's a great way to assess needs. But, you have needs and questions, too.

Let's address those questions one by one.

1) **How much help can I expect?** This is the first thing you need to find out, once you are asked to conduct activities at an event. Yes, I said asked. Being the children's officer does not obligate you to be at children's point all day for every event held in your group unless you want to do that. You are the coordinator of activities, not the sole source of them. So, how do you get help? How Much help do you need?

Here's a list of activities roughly divided according to the amount of help needed (anytime you schedule an activity, there must be two responsible people present, in order to run those activities, barring running for a surgeon or other needed person in an emergency. Thus, if NO ONE helps at all, there are no activities. No exceptions. This is for your protection). So, this list will help you plan according to the amount of help you have managed to drum up:

No Help At All. Nada. Zilch.

The best you can do is provide a safe play area. The parents will bring their own toys and will supervise the area themselves. If there are not two adults present at the area, it's closed and the children need to stay with their parents. You may choose to be one of the people who is "responsible," freeing up the parents to stay there one at a time. The parents will clean up the area of their own toys. Post signs to that effect at troll, also mentioning that if two adults aren't there, it's closed until enough adults are there.

NOTE: If the ages of your local children are very young, this may be your best option regardless of how much help you find. We sometimes call this the "children's list" and ring the area with chairs---you can rope and flag it if you like. Chairs make it a great area for parents to sit and schmooze while watching their kids in the middle of the central hall or outside near (not too near) the Adult list field. Parents who can watch their children AND have fun will continue to be helpful to you in children's activities in the future.

You and One or two Volunteers all day long

Your best bet in this scenario is to do one of three things:

A) Have a few (ie: two or three) scheduled classes for kids, with specific activities. Not every activity needs to be crafts. When the activity is over, the children return to their parents until the next scheduled activity. Encourage your assistants to plan the activities. They may have hidden talents!

B) Have a low-maintenance type of activity. Quests, treasure hunts, "gentle" hunts (children find specific examples of people at events: who's the king, name a Pelican, etc...), and the like are all planning intensive but end up being personnel cheap. You hand out papers at the beginning, collect them at the end, "grade" them, announce winners and hand out prizes. It's always nice to have one or two big prizes and then a small one (candy, baubles, etc.) for all participants as these types of activities are quite challenging and often require the kids to join forces.

C) Think of who you know that might know something interesting the kids might like. Know someone who likes to make sotelties? Ask them to do a marzipan modeling class for 1 hour only. Know a Knight? Ask him to come and model his armor and talk about being a knight, or how to make chain mail or to help show them what to look at when watching the list field. Know a Bard? Most bards will happily run on and on with a captive audience and have a store of funny stories. Know a Brewer? Ask her to show how to make fruit syrups or herb vinegars, etc... Be sure to thank these persons profusely and a small gift won't go awry---maybe they'll help you out again in the future. Networking is a good thing, and with enough networking, you get to sit down and enjoy the show as much as the kids.

I have so much help, I get to go watch the fighting/fencing/archery/A&S while my staff runs Children's Point.

Congratulations. I'd like to shake your hand. You don't need my help, and I possibly may need yours!

You can see that the more people you manage to talk into helping you, the less you will actually have to do the day of the event. It pays to ensure that people are involved with children's activities. Not only do you get to take it easy, you also have a ready source of replacements when you decide it's time to retire.

2) Where is the kid's area? Any time you plan where to put the children's area, you need to keep in mind the following questions:

- How close are the Bathrooms? You can't leave the group to take kids to the restroom. They must be able to go there and back on their own without getting lost.
- How easy is it for parents to find you and check up on their kids?
- How far would you have to go for help if something happened?
- Is the area safe for kids?

3) How involved are the parents? It's sad but true, many parents aren't that involved with their kids while at SCA events. That may be for a number of reasons, but you should feel able to approach those parents when you need help. A good way to do this is to talk to them all somewhere besides the event, and the meeting I mentioned earlier in the article is a good way to do that in a positive way, without singling any one person out.

4) How Many Children goes hand in hand with **5) What are their age ranges** and **6) What do they like to do?**

Plan activities that they like to do, that are age appropriate, appeal to both boys and girls, and take into consideration the other things that might effect kids at events such as youth fighting or youth archery, etc..... And if you had a meeting of parents and kids to find this out.....

7) What about my other obligations?

No one expects you to spend all day at Children's Point without relief. You have the right to schedule activities around your needs, so long as they are also convenient for the children, parents, and the event planners. So if your Lord is fighting for you in a challenge tourney, go ahead and block out an hour of time in the afternoon to watch him fight, or find someone to fill in for you. If your Lady is competing in the big Bardic Challenge, you are allowed to watch so long as you planned that into the schedule. Keep in mind there will be unusual times when it's good for you to have activities (during court, for instance, or at the second half of a very long feast).

Sound like a lot of work? It Is! But only if you try to do it alone. Once you have figured these things out (and it only takes once or twice), then it is fairly easy to decide which of your activity inspirations are sure bets, and which are best saved for another time.

By planning for help FIRST and then planning activities around that help, you stand a better chance of lasting in the office for as long as you want.