

# Volunteer Training

## Goals

Properly trained volunteers are key to making the Mighty Acorns program a success. They have the confidence and ability to lead field trips that are both meaningful and memorable for the students. And they are more willing to continue their relationship with the Mighty Acorns program, thereby providing a sense of continuity and a depth of experience that would otherwise be lacking.

The training needed depends on the job(s) your volunteers will do and their previous experience. You may wish to refer to the AChart of Responsibilities@ in the previous teacher section. In this section, we discuss training for leading children in the on-site educational activity, stewardship work, and free exploration on site. We assume that volunteers will be filling these roles and that they have no prior experience. If others (say, teachers or interns) will be filling these roles, then you should give this training to them. If your volunteers are already experienced in one or both of these roles, you can abbreviate portions of the training accordingly. By the end of the training, the volunteers should be familiar with the site in different seasons and should be comfortable while discovering its physical features and biodiversity, modeling stewardship activities, and planning logistics in advance of field trips.

The goals of training are for the volunteers to:

- Learn how to lead students through the on-site, free-exploration and stewardship activities
- Learn how to model and guide students in observation and questioning skills.
- Become comfortable with the field site and its ecosystems
- Learn to identify target species (plants for seed collecting in fall, brush to be cut in winter, and weeds to be pulled in spring)

- Learn where on the site the stewardship activities will occur
- Help students understand why and how to participate in stewardship activities

Volunteers are encouraged to bring their own unique skills to the program to further enrich the students= field experience. It is not necessary for teachers and volunteers to be experts in ecology, birding, or botany. More important are an openness to and an enthusiasm for the natural world and the ability to relate well to children.

## Strategy

Keep in mind that new volunteers must absorb a lot of information in a short period of time (everything from where the trails and outhouses are to plant ID), and they must be able to talk comfortably about nature and their adopted natural area to the children. Check that your volunteers do feel confident before they leave the training session; if not, be responsive to their concerns.

Because the appearance of the land changes very quickly, training should occur each season (fall, winter, and spring) about two weeks before the field trips.

If possible, partners should hold an indoor introductory session to show the Chicago Wilderness video. Then the group should visit the site itself to review field trip logistics and activities. For new volunteers, more orientation will be needed in the fall because it is their first season working as part of a team with the teachers.

A training session should be a model of what a field trip can be like. It should be a hands-on, interactive experience for the training leader and volunteer participants. It should be done at the site the children will visit. The leader should have all necessary tools to model the trip and practice stewardship activities.

## Materials

Below is a complete list of materials for your first training session. Most of these materials need to be distributed only once and can be skipped for subsequent training.

1. Volunteer manual, one copy per volunteer. The manual consists of the following sections of the Mighty Acorns Program Manual.
  - Part I–Introduction to the Mighty Acorns Program
  - Part VI–General Background Information. (This part of the manual includes instructions for stewardship activities.)
  - “Guidelines for Free Exploration,” “On-Site Activity,” and “Stewardship Activity” from Part II of this manual. Include all seasons and all levels at which children are currently working.
  - “Role Modeling: A Handout for Volunteers.”
  - “Leading a Field Trip: A Handout for Volunteers.”
2. Chicago Wilderness’s *An Atlas of Biodiversity*, one copy for each volunteer. To obtain copies, contact the Chicago Wilderness Education Team Assistant (312-665-7444).
3. Checklist of volunteers’ responsibilities for the season, arranged chronologically. You can use the “Chart of Responsibilities” as the basis for this list. Make sure the list includes any supplies (such as drinking water and tissue) that the volunteers should bring on the field trip.
4. Location of field-trip site, map, and other relevant site information, one copy for each volunteer. The more detailed your site map is, the smaller the chances that the volunteers will worry about getting lost.
5. Sheet with time(s) and date(s) of field trip(s), your phone number, phone number of a contact person at each school, and another phone number for the school (in case the contact person is on a broken-down bus with the children).
6. Chicago Wilderness video. (This need not be distributed, just played.)
7. Stewardship tools for the season, as needed: clippers, paper bags, gloves, seed-processing boxes, loppers, bow saws, garbage bags.
8. Optional resources such as plant and animal identification books/sheets to aid in the further study of local biodiversity and stewardship efforts.