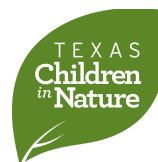


# Campus Campouts

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department  
Texas Children in Nature Network

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# Welcome

When children learn and play with nature they are healthier, happier and perform better in school. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) supports connecting children and families with nature through multiple programs including Texas Children in Nature (TCiN) and Texas Outdoor Families (TOF).

TCiN is a network of over 500 partner organizations who are dedicated to improving the lives of children and families through a positive connection with nature. A recent study\* shows children feel happier and more social when they spend time in nature, and they actually prefer to play outdoor rather than indoors. However, adults often feel they do not have the skills to take their children camping, fishing or exploring the outdoors; as a result they don't go. Campus Campouts are a great way to equip children and adults with the skills they need to feel confident in the outdoors. \**Nature of Americans* <https://natureofamericans.org/>

## What is a Campus Campout

Have you ever wanted to take your entire class on a campout, but lacked the time or budget to do so? Why not use the school or church campus as a park? Hosting a campout is a great way to build community engagement, develop outdoor skills and have fun.

The Texas Children in Nature network and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department have put together a step-by-step guide to help you plan and execute a campus campout.

### **Benefits to Kids:**

Research shows when children learn and play in nature they are healthier, both mentally and physically, more cooperative with others, better problem solvers, feel more confident and perform better in school. In short, they are healthier, happier and smarter. Learning about outdoor skills gives children a sense of self-reliance and improves their confidence. Plus, it is a great way to slip in some reading and math while having fun. Just think about the math that goes into the design of a modern tent!

For all the latest research on how nature benefits a child's development and improves their wellbeing, please visit [www.texaschildreninnature.org](http://www.texaschildreninnature.org).

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## Community and Family Engagement:

Campus Campouts are a great way to increase and strengthen family and community involvement at your school or church. Students succeed academically, attend school more regularly and for longer, and typically enroll in programs in higher education when school staff, parents, families, and the community works together (Region 16 ESC, 2017).

In a world that has become increasingly busy, Campus Campouts are one small way to assist schools, families and community members with putting quality time back on their calendar. Research shows that children spend between 7-11 hours per day indoors, sedentary and with media, and only minutes per day playing in nature. This change to a more sedentary, indoor lifestyle has long lasting impact on children from a rise in childhood obesity to lack of vitamin D to depression. The good news is, this is a solvable issue and you can be part of that solution. By hosting a Campus Campout you are offering children in your school and community an opportunity to get outdoors and connect with nature in a safe and supportive environment. We are so excited you have chosen to engage students, their families, your staff and your community!



## Getting Started

Planning an after-hours event on a campus requires input from many stakeholders. Make sure your planning committee has members from the school or church administration, parents, teachers, and the kids. Below are suggestions on how to structure each role. However, we know that there are many ways to organize and deliver a great program. Do what works best for you

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and your community. Please see the example of the Volunteer Job Description in the back of this guide.

## **Setting Up The Planning Team**

### **Lead / Program coordinator:**

- Identify partners and participants
- Set meeting dates and reserve space to convene
- Set goals such as;
- How many participants
- Overnight or a day time activity
- Coordinate the other planning work groups

### **Co-Leader:**

- Divide up the leadership duties
- Administration
- Engage someone from the administration to make sure all legal questions are answered and approved

### **Facilities Team:**

- Engage someone from the facilities team so they can help with;
- Access to restrooms
- Making sure the lawn is cut in the area intended to use for the campsite
- Treat for fire ants
- Turn off the in ground sprinkler system if there is one in the area being used to camp
- Will the school be open to the participants in the evening?

### **Activities and Logistics:**

- When planning the activities this is a great way to engage community partners to volunteer their time or skills
- The agenda should account for a few basic steps that will take things easier to manage the flow of the event
- Arrival time and check in process
- Food prep and service
- Quiet time – 10pm-7am

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- Reflection time as a group
  - Checking out or leaving

**Volunteer Coordinator:**

- Puts out the call for assistance from the community or participating families
- Establishes job needs for volunteers
- Manages on site volunteers and parents

Once you have your team set and are ready to plan an exciting overnight or day campout there are a few things to consider. The rest of the steps in this guide will help you not just prepare a fun adventure, that will also engage the parents and community in a new and interesting way.

## **Plan for Safety**

Getting outdoors can be fun and safe when steps are taken to prepare in advance. First check with the administration to make sure the campus can be used for an overnight event. If it cannot, then see the information in this guide on how you can host a day camp and still have a fun experience.

**First Aid Station:**

- Can your school nurse be on-site for the duration of the campout?
- Can your district provide a person or supplies for this station?
- Is there a parent at your school who is a nurse or EMT that can stay for the duration of the event?
- Is there a local clinic or doctor office that would be interested in setting up a booth or participating in your event and could also serve as the First Aid station?
- Ask local businesses if they can donate a basic First Aid kit
- Set the first aid station in an area that is visible and convenient to access

**Inclement Weather & Emergency Action Plan:**

- What will you do if it rains, is too hot, or too cold?
- What will you do if you need to evacuate people or seek shelter?
- In the event of an emergency, make sure you have a designated person that will contact emergency services and speaks on behalf of the organization
- Have a team that will communicate with the emergency point person and relay information back to the participants

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- Keep the emergency contact information at the First Aid station

### **Food Allergies:**

- Food allergies should be considered if the group is sharing a meal or planning a pot-luck. Make sure the person preparing the food makes a card with ingredients.
- If participants are bringing their own food, it might be a good idea to have some extra food on-hand for those participants who forgot something at home.
- We recommend communicating about food responsibilities several times before the event.

### **Site Assessment**

- Are there any features in the landscape you need to be aware of?
  - Holes, hills, rocks, sand
- Are there any pests in the area?
  - Insects, ants, wildlife
- Are you near a water source? Especially if you will have a campfire.
- Are there open areas/gates that need to be open or locked?
- Are there areas you don't want people going?
  - How will you sign or block off those areas?

## **Plan the Gear**

Collecting the gear for the campout may seem difficult at first. However, you might find there is more gear in the community than you suspect. Here are some tips on how to ask the parents or other youth development groups to supply the camping gear for the campout.

### **Gear availability:**

- Some families will already have camping essentials. The planning team should send out a notice to the parents ahead of time to get a sense of what the parents can bring.
- Community partners such as retailers, scouting clubs, or members of the community may have these gear to lend. Creating these connections will make it easier for those without the gear to participate.
- Gear Libraries are communally shared sets of equipment. These can be established and used for future Campus Campouts.
- The school or church might consider loaning or renting out the gear to families so they can have camping adventures on their own.



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- On the resource page there is information about funding gear libraries.
  - Youth groups such as Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire and Boys and Girls Clubs might have gear that they can loan.

#### **Gear Essentials for an overnight campout:**

- Tent
- Sleeping bag or blankets and pillow
- Flashlight
- Change of clothes

#### **Comfortable Extras:**

- Sleeping pad, yoga mat, or cot
- Stove, fuel, cooking utensils, pots/pans, plates and utensils
- Folding table
- Folding chairs
- Cooler with Ice



## **Plan for Food and Refreshments**

One of the great joys of camping is sharing a meal together around a campfire or at a picnic table. There are several ways to plan for meals and refreshments that are healthy, fun and budget friendly. Below are some ideas on how to share the burden and the expense of feeding a large group. Remember- make the healthy choice the easy choice when it comes to food at a campus campout.

#### **Potluck:**

- Cooked at home and brought along
- Cooked on-site via camp stove or campfire
- Each family brings a dish to share
- An opportunity to theme the dinner

**Cultural Kitchen:** This is the same idea as a pot luck, with a twist

- Ask participants to bring a dish that represents their family or culture

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- Ask the students to plan the meals and pick a culture that they have to represent through food

#### **Community Sponsored:**

- Ask a community restaurant to cater or donate the meals for the campout

#### **Campfire Meals:**

- If your campus allows for a campfire, there are lots of Dutch Oven or campfire cooking ideas that are healthy
- on the TCiN Pinterest page <https://www.pinterest.com/txnaturekids/>

#### **Beverages:**

- Ask families to bring their own water in reusable cups or bottles.
- Provide access to drinking water.
- Provide healthy refreshment options.

#### **Utensils, Cups, and Plates:**

- Ask families to bring their own plates, cups and utensils.
- When possible reduce waste by using reusable dishware and cups.
- Recycle and reuse everything you can.

#### **Grill or Cooking Station:**

- Perhaps a family has a large grill they can loan for the event.
  - Make sure there is space to put a large grill.
- Ask a volunteer to always be tending the grill when in use.

#### **Trash and Recycling Receptacles:**

- Place trash and recycling bins away from the tents to avoid ants and unwanted insects.
- Make sure there are enough bins and trash bags available for the event and clean up.

#### **Food Storage:**

- When overnight camping, it is best to keep all food OUT OF THE TENTS.
- Place all food in sealed containers before calling it a night.
- Coolers and tubs should be placed away from the tents and on a table, in a building or in a vehicle if possible so you don't attract insects or wildlife.



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## Plan for Activities

Local parks and outdoor spaces provide an opportunity for families to explore, live an active lifestyle and make connections to the natural resources of Texas. A Campus Campout provides an excellent opportunity to get kids and parents feeling confident and excited about planning an outdoor adventure of their own. When organizing your campout it will be a good idea to engage community partners and parents to lead some of the outdoor skills or conservation education lessons. Consider taking a [Project Wild or Growing Up Wild](#) training course to get even more ideas for TEKS aligned lessons that are fun in the outdoors.

*We also highly recommend planning enough time to simply let kids play and families hang out.*

Below is a list of some types of activities that you could consider for your audience. Not every activity is appropriate for all ages. Texas Children in Nature also has a list of Campus Campout activities and camping tips on their Pinterest page <https://www.pinterest.com/txnaturekids/>

- Scavenger hunt
- Photo contest or adventure
- Backyard bass- Contact TPWD
- Archery in Schools- Contact TPWD
- Check out one of the TWPDP or Texas Wildlife Association (TWA) Teacher Loaner Trunks
- Geocaching or letterboxing
- Dutch oven cooking with the Texas Buffalo Soldiers- Contact TPWD
- Campus Nature Walk- Contact Texas Master Naturalist
- Star gazing- there are several apps that show all the constellations, satellites, stars and planets
- Campfire stories or skits.
- Reflection- each campout should end with a reflection where each person can share what they liked, learned or disliked



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- State Park Adventure Outreach – Contact your nearest State Park to invite a park ranger to your event. They could host an activity or campfire chat

### **Night Sounds:**

- Each campus will have different sounds after dark
- Ask a volunteer to think about the sounds that the campers could hear once the lights are out
- Ask that volunteer to share what those sounds will be in a group activity before sunset
- Contact the Texas Outdoor Family program for a shareable PowerPoint game about nature night sounds if a projector and speakers are available at your program
- Help campers distinguish between human made sounds and nature made sounds

### **Quiet Hours:**

- Set some specific quiet time hours and tell each camper upfront what those hours are.
- Quiet time doesn't mean zero sound, but it means talking in low voices, turning out lights and turning down the energy levels.

### **Night Time Activities:**

- **Night Walk** –Listening and watching for our nocturnal friends, explaining safety and respect.
- **Star Gazing** –Talk about the moon and if applicable, look for the big dipper or north star.
- **Storytelling** – Folklore and storytelling of great outdoor family experiences around the campfire.
- **Night Noises** –A guessing game with audio clues for kids with the most familiar night animals

## **Plan for Packing Up**

Volunteers are essential! Before you begin planning your event, you'll want to think about what the cleanup might be like. Ideally, we want families to feel comfortable when going on camping trips or day trips in the future and we want to teach them the skills they would need to be successful and safe. We encourage you to involve families in the cleanup process for several reasons: it makes it easier on your staff and volunteers, it helps build a sense of ownership for families, it allows you an opportunity to talk about Leave No Trace and leaving an area better than you found it, and it will make the entire task go more quickly!

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***Tip– Packing up the gear and clean up are the hardest times to keep volunteers around. Make sure you plan something worth sticking around for once the tents are put away and the campus has been cleaned.***

- Recruit or create a “committee” of volunteers, staff, or parents to help you with cleaning up.
- Discuss “[Leave No Trace](#)” principles with everyone when they first arrive to your event and bring it up again when it’s time for cleaning up
- Decide how you will communicate to families their help will be essential in cleaning up
- Kids often love being given a job or task, so don’t hesitate to assign clearly defined assignments
- Making designated areas for returning any gear, supplies, or trash
- Designate people to “float” around and help families as they pack up their gear
- Remind families about micro-trash (tiny bits of trash such as corners torn off wrappers, lids, water balloons) and encourage them to pick up trash even it was there before the campout
- Consider having an awards or reflection time after clean up to thank families for joining in on the adventure
- At the conclusion of the event, provide encouragement to the participants to continue with their new skills, build on their confidence and maintain the outdoor and active lifestyle
- Print out certificates that can be handed out for participation or achievement
- State Park Guides (available at parks), publications assisting in planning the next adventure, or suggestions on how to get involved in a family nature club can help an outdoor family flourish make great handouts
- Find all the local, state and national parks at [www.NatureRocksTexas.org](http://www.NatureRocksTexas.org)

**Consider having the following supplies on hand:**

- Trash cans
- Recycle bins
- Extra trash bags
- Gloves
- Cleaning wipes or towels with water
- Dish soap
- Hand soap



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- Toilet paper
  - Paper towels

## Hosting a Day Campout

Hosting an overnight campout on your campus or at your facility is a great way to introduce parents and families to nature in a more controlled environment. If your campus or facility is not able to accommodate an overnight campout or if your community is not ready for this step, you can still have a “mock” campout during the day for a few hours! You can have families participate in similar activities without the commitment to staying overnight.

You will want to take into consideration the same steps mentioned in this guide, but you will plan for your event to end at a certain time. For example, you might invite families for a 3-hour period where tents will be set up so they can still get the feeling of camping, but you can then pack up everything at the end of the event so families can return to their homes. Families should be involved in setup and breakdown of the tents and gear.

You may also consider hosting smaller events more frequently (e.g., monthly) to keep families engaged and to continue building on the community you’ve created.

## Campus Campout Extras

Each school or church has different policies on how they process volunteers. Please follow the policies of your organization to ensure the safety of the kids. We highly recommend that all volunteers get a background check and have all expectations clearly communicated to them.

### Background Check:

- Background checks are crucial to hosting a Campus Campout. This event will require interaction with youth and their families. All volunteers must have the appropriate background check completed to ensure the safety of all participants.
- Research the forms necessary for working with children in your district. As you begin to recruit volunteers, begin building information packets that will be distributed as they sign-up.

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**Commitment:**

Part of volunteer recruitment is ensuring a sense of commitment from your volunteers. Commitment can be defined in many ways and as the coordinator it is up to you to decide what levels of commitment are necessary to make your project successful and effective.

- Set a volunteer schedule that is clear, including how many hours might be required for planning and execution.
- As volunteers begin to express interest, make this schedule available.
- Be sure that you are clear on the minimum number of hours you expect to be committed to the project.

**Short Volunteer Job/ Duty Description:**

An accurate and detailed job description for volunteers is vital to creating a positive and sustainable volunteer experience. Provide clear and accurate descriptions of roles that need to be filled. If there are multiple duties for one role be sure to list all of them and the skills needed to be successful in this role. Be sure to create multiple descriptions and not just one overarching description for the entire project where a multitude of volunteer duties are possible.

**Engaging the Community:**

This project can be a great mechanism to engage the community in a new and innovative way. For example the business community might be able to donate meals, or a local sporting goods store may be able to donate gear. If the Campus Campout also has a volunteer or service learning option with it, then the community can be engaged with that project as well. For example, Keep Texas Beautiful might be engaged to offer supplies for a campus clean up or Tree Folks may be able to donate trees for a planting project.

Asking the business community for donations may seem daunting, however if you arrive to their place of business with a plan it can be a fairly painless process. Most likely the school's Parent Teacher Association or Church will have policies and a form to use when making a request for donations.

**Working with TCIN Networks:**

The Texas Children in Nature (TCiN) network and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) are dedicated to connecting children and families with nature to be healthier, happier,



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smarter and build the next generation of stewards. This network consists of over 500 partner organizations that could offer support via activities, volunteers, gear or even funding.

Please reach out to your local regional leader via the [Texas Children in Nature](#) website. You can also find a list of partners in your community on the [NatureRocksTexas.org](#) website in your region. NatureRocksTexas.org also has a list of resources and nature-based activities in your region.

#### **Texas Parks and Wildlife – Texas Outdoor Family Program:**

The [TOF program](#) establishes community partnerships with eligible audiences to host families or youth group campouts in State Parks utilizing borrowed camping gear from TPWD. This partnership comes with an outdoor leadership training for group leaders and focuses on leading safe and fun outdoor experiences. This training occurs in the metro areas of DFW, Central Texas, and Houston twice annually.

TOF Community Partnerships would be a terrific next step for campuses and community organizations to further connect families to affordable camping opportunities in their nearby State Parks.

Please contact the TOF team lead, Robert Owen ([Robert.owen@tpwd.texas.gov](mailto:Robert.owen@tpwd.texas.gov)) to learn more about the applicability of the training to your needs and the potential opportunity to create a new community partnership with your organization.





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## Resource List:

Texas Children in Nature- <https://texaschildreninnature.org/>

Nature Rocks Texas site- <http://www.naturerockstexas.org/>

Texas Outdoor Family- <http://www.texasstateparks.org/tof>

Texas State Parks- <https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/>

Texas Parks and Wildlife Outdoor Education- <https://tpwd.texas.gov/education/>

Families in Nature- <https://familiesinnature.org/>

Leave No Trace- <https://lnt.org/learn/7-principles>

TPWD Co-OP Grant-

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/business/grants/recreation-grants/community-outdoor-outreach-program-co-op-grants>

Grantwatch- <https://www.grantwatch.com/>

Texas Education Agency- <https://tea.texas.gov/grants/>

TPWD Grants and Assistance- <https://tpwd.texas.gov/business/grants/>

TCiN Pinterest Page- <https://www.pinterest.com/txnaturekids/>

