

Guidelines for group activities with children in Guatemala
AKA "Bible Camp", "Bible School", "VBS"

Group interaction with children can be one of the most rewarding parts of a work trip to Guatemala. It can also be one of the most frustrating, especially when approached with the traditional U.S. Bible School mindset. Based on lessons learned during 9 years of work trips to Guatemala, we have compiled the following guidelines. Special thanks goes to Betsy Keyack, Sharon Williams, and Laura Richards for their input based on years of experience.

Over the course of a Pura Vida work trip, team members begin to understand that it's not the quantity of cinderblocks laid, patients seen, or teeth extracted that marks the success of a trip. Instead, what they remember most is quality time spent with the people of Guatemala. The same can be said for our childrens programs; it's not the complexity of the program or the number of crafts that matters, but the relationships developed with the children. The guidelines below can help us create programs that deepen those relationships. We ask that you please consider these guidelines carefully when planning group activities with children in Guatemala.

- Create a simple, flexible program:
 - Nothing in rural Guatemala is predictable; major last-minute changes are the norm. Pura Vida trip planners can reduce much, but never all, of the uncertainty.
 - Team leaders generally do a good job of reminding team members to be flexible.
 - Bible School activities, however, have historically been the least flexible part of any work trip. A last-minute change in location or number of students can cause a highly-structured program to implode, resulting in a chaotic event and stressed-out team members.
 - We recommend avoiding rigid, highly-structured schedules:
 - Traditional focus is on getting kids through an assembly line of activities. This reduces time for quality interaction with children.
 - It's culturally inappropriate as well. Guatemalans are not time-conscious in the same way we are. They don't naturally accommodate rigid schedules.
- Eliminate all giveaways:
 - Giveaways create a "Santa Claus syndrome", reinforcing local expectations of U.S. team members as sources of stuff and Guatemalans as passive receivers. This is not in keeping with Pura Vida's mission in Guatemala.
 - Reduces quality of interaction. "I don't want my relationship with a child to be a box of crayons" – Betsy Keyack
 - Can create mob behavior
- Avoid activities that depend heavily on specialized materials brought from the U.S.:

- Limits events to a certain number of students, reducing flexibility.
- Sets the false precedent that childrens ministry requires funding and materials that local churches don't have the rest of the year.
- Take a disproportionate amount of preparation and organizational time compared to other components of a work trip.
- Takes up much of the checked baggage allowance
- Can cause issues when clearing Customs in Guatemala City
- Have local adults in positions of authority:
 - U.S. team members have no implicit authority in this situation. Putting them in charge of groups of otherwise unsupervised children is asking too much.
 - Most churches will have leaders of childrens ministry. Take advantage of them – they know what works in their culture.
 - Kids will behave better.
- Work with smaller quantities of children:
 - For a work team of 20 - 25, a group of 100 children is plenty.
 - At the same time, be flexible enough so that it's not a problem if 50 more kids show up.
 - Remember that childrens' mothers may want to take part in the activities, or at least watch.
 - Work with village leaders to recruit students in a specific age range in order limit event size.
- Vary locations:
 - Once a village has been exposed for a few years to traditional U.S. Bible Schools based heavily on giveaways, local children become much more rowdy and difficult to manage in these situations.
 - Pura Vida has scholarship programs in 9 villages in the Chichicastenango area. Many of those are rarely seen by work teams, and would welcome a visit.
- Make events more interactive:
 - Traditional VBS reinforces a passive, receiving audience; us vs. them.
 - Work towards a more collaborative experience.
 - Sing songs that the children know -- they would love to teach us.
 - Integrate local church leaders into the program. They can do much more than just translate.
- Simplify:
 - Avoid timed rotations of groups of children. Allow kids to participate in the activities they prefer. Give them time to finish what they are working on instead of rushing them on to another activity.
 - Focus on fewer, simpler group activities:
 - Coloring, painting, drawing: most kids could spend hours doing just this.



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- Outdoor activities such as soccer, basketball, and tag. Some kids might elect to spend all of their time outside.
- One of our most enjoyable events was an impromptu gathering at a church where we played musical chairs for over an hour.
- Move from highly structured, hierarchic, stuff-based programs to loosely structured, relational, activity-based programs.

One of the things noticed almost universally by work team members traveling to Guatemala is that Guatemalans do not seem to need masses of stuff to be happy. The same goes for the children. Lighter, flexible events can be just as enjoyable, more culturally appropriate, and inflict much less stress on the U.S. team members. This is a win-win situation. We just need to overcome our traditional expectations of what constitutes "Bible School" and begin working towards something that will be more beneficial in the long term to all involved.