

## **How I Came to Love Permission Slips! A Key Tool of Protection**

Everyone who works with youth as a staff person or volunteer has probably had some version of this nightmare... your new visiting teen who thinks they are auditioning for the X-games takes a spill on the slopes. As the emergency room personnel try to stop the bleeding a nurse turns to you and says – I'm sorry, sir, but we cannot save this young man's life unless you have a PERMISSION SLIP... the words hang in the air... did you get a form on this kid? Would the church secretary be able to find his parents? Wait – he's a visitor – who did he come with again? Then you wake up in a cold sweat on the bus – you're not even at the slopes yet and those trusty forms (even for the new kids!) are right there in your bag... aren't they?

In the list of things youth and children ministry leaders have to have but seldom use are Permission Slips (or Medical Release Forms). The requirements and reasoning involved in these essential documents can look a little complex and confusing. But have no fear – Permission Slips do not have to be complicated or a chore – in fact they can actually be a force for good in your ministry and not just another obligation to be fulfilled.

There are two common misconceptions about permission slips:

They will help prevent you from being sued. FALSE. If you are negligent or responsible for endangering a youth's safety a signature giving permission to ride in your van will not protect you and your church from a lawsuit.

You cannot get medical treatment for a child or youth without one. FALSE. If the child or youth is in imminent danger the hospital or emergency personnel will act to save that child and figure out who is going to pay for it later.

Here is the benefit in permission slips/medical release forms. They provide:

1. Contact information. If something does happen a good medical form will give you all the available contacts for the youth or child's parents or guardian, grandparents or other emergency contact in case the parents cannot be reached. There should also be contact information for the child's physician.
2. Medical information. This will give you a heads up on allergies and medications the youth may have. Are they on a medication that you would need to administer? Are there potential issues with allergies? Does the youth have an illness (mental or physical) that would affect how they interact with other children? Parents do not always disclose what is going on with their children – or they may assume you know – but if you ask the right questions and read the responses then you will get a valuable heads up on potential issues.
3. A buy-in from parents. A medical form or permission slip gives the church an opportunity to get permission from parents for several things:
  - a. Permission for a youth or child to ride in a vehicle designated by the church. This could be a church owned van or a rental bus or van or even a volunteer's car. This offers parents a chance to approve the way a church transports youth and children.
  - b. Permission to seek medical attention for their child. This offers parents a chance to know that you value the health and safety of their child and a chance for them to approve your decision to act on that child's behalf if they are in need of medical attention.
  - c. Do you have a web page? A good permission slip offers a chance to tell parents about it and for them to allow their youth or child's picture to be displayed (in crowd shots and without identifying information!)

Let's look at some common questions:

Q: What information should be on them?

A: At a minimum the above three items should be covered – contact information, medical information (including insurance policy), and a statement of permission or release for the child to participate in the activities of the church.

Q: Who needs them?

A: Everyone – whether they go on a trip or not. Some churches will do a particular release form for each event and that is good – it makes sure you have the forms you need for the youth or children that are participating in a given event. But the best practice is to treat a med-form or permission slip as a registration to participate in your ministry. Every youth or child that participates in ministry at your church should have an updated permission slip on file.

Q: How often should you update forms?

A: Again, some churches may opt to get new forms for every trip or event but at a bare minimum they should be updated annually. Of course, if there is any new information (insurance policy change, new cell phone #, etc.) then the parents should do a new form. If you follow this policy of keeping a form on file then it is critical that someone maintains them – making sure they are up to date and that you have a form for everyone who is participating in a given event. Youth and parents should have easy access to extra forms (downloadable from a website is ideal) to fill out and bring for visitors.

Finally – here are a couple of tips that can make these essential forms even more useful:

Use the contact information to build your contact data base on a youth or child. The contact form can help you improve the data gathering part of your permission slips to include things like a child's birthdate, current school, email, cell phone – and carrier if you plan to text them – or any other contact information your church needs to maintain effective relationships with the family.

Use the permission part of the form to give a code of conduct. Have the parents sign that they will be financially responsible for transporting their child home from an event if they violate the conduct policies associated with that event. (This assumes you have published conduct policies.) So update those forms and keep them current!