

Suggestions for Conducting Reference Checks

“Would you be willing to have work one-on-one with your child?”

This is the most important question to ask a reference when you're screening adults who wish to volunteer, according to Paddy Bowen, Executive Director of Volunteer Canada.)

Personal reference checks are now an essential element of Scouts Canada's Adult Member Volunteer Screening Process. Each new applicant must provide three personal references to interviewers. They should then follow up on these references.

Call All References

Who can be a reference?

Potential volunteers for leadership roles should provide references who know them and can give some indication whether they are suitable. References might include close friends, a relative (no more than one), or a current or former employer. Excellent references would be familiar with the potential volunteer's involvement in similar roles with other organizations or related employment.

Plan your reference interview carefully.

Refer to the job description and your checklist for characteristics of acceptable candidates. The following are essential to most roles: (a) ability to work effectively in a team, (b) ability to work with children ages eight to ten, and (c) shows a good example.

After the interview with the potential volunteer you may have identified some information or questions about his past or behavior that you felt warranted confirmation or further pursuit. Decide what you really need to know.

When you call the reference person, be sure to introduce yourself in your organizational role. Some people may be surprised by your call. Others may be nervous at first to give their opinion of someone they know. Relax. Your comfort level will be communicated in your voice, and will help put the person at ease.

Tell the reference how long the call will take (about ten minutes) and describe the role the volunteer will have in your organization. Be positive about the prospect of having the potential volunteer involved, and remember to keep questions relevant to the volunteer role. Here are some questions to consider:

- 1 “How long, and in what capacity, have you known _____? What is your current relationship with him?”
2. “Can you picture this _____ working with nine to thirteen-year-old children in an active program?”

Source: How to Get the Right People: Screening Interviews (Part A and Part B) (Bryon Milliere, May 1997, The Leader Magazine).

3. "Can you describe how _____ works as a member of a team?"
4. "What strengths do you believe _____ has for this role?"
5. "_____ mentioned that he coached baseball with you. How did he interact with the children? How was he with the parents?"

Listen for the traits and behaviors that match those of a suitable leader. As a coach, was he patient, encouraging, and dependable, or was he harsh to players when they made mistakes? Were parents kept informed and supportive of the coaching team, or were they constantly concerned with the coaching style?

Ask open-ended questions that require more than just a "yes" or "no". Keep asking clarifying questions until you understand the answers the reference is giving. Encourage both positive and negative feedback about the individual.

When calling former employers or organizations, ask whether they would hire or use this person's services again? If you get a negative or confusing response, feed it back or summarize the answer to probe further. Advise them that information will be kept as confidentially as possible, but that you may be required to release the information by law to the applicant or a law enforcement agency.

For the Record

You must keep a written record of the telephone interview. Be as objective and as factual as possible when writing the information down. The responses you get from three references together with your notes from the interview will provide the basis for your decision regarding Dave's suitability.

We are not looking for "perfect volunteers", but we are concerned about ensuring suitability and aptitude for a role. Most skills and knowledge can be taught, but attitudes are fairly fixed. What have you learned of the applicant's attitudes, character, attitudes towards children, discipline, etc.?

Your final question should be the key question identified earlier: "Would you be willing to have _____ work one-on-one with your child?" End the conversation by thanking the reference for their time.

Suggestions for Conducting an Interview with Potential Volunteers

How should you conduct the interview?

Start with this thought: An interview should not become an inquisition. Expect success! Most people have a great deal to offer youth. A screening interview provides an opportunity to both sell the Mission and to verify a candidate's suitability.

Break the ice before you begin formal questions. Help to put everyone at ease by finding things you have in common. Do this by exchanging general comments about family, friends, work, vacations or the neighborhood. This builds rapport.

State your purpose. The vast majority of volunteers who make it to the interview will be acceptable. This is your opportunity to provide a positive introduction to Scouting. Show commitment to the care of young members and be proud of our Mission. Be enthusiastic about the program's value. Don't apologize for caring about children in the group. Most candidates will understand your concern to find suitable adult volunteers for work with children. (This will be particularly true if they have children involved themselves.)

Build a Profile

Ask a few questions to establish details such as length of time in the community, interests, relationships with adults and children, neighborhood involvement, and employment history. Build on what you already know about the individual. Remember: you're interviewing for a volunteer, leadership role, not a high security position in the RCMP. Take a sincere interest in who they are just as you would if they became your neighbor. Ask questions like these:

**Have you been in Surry (or Winchester or Dickenson) long?
What was it like living there?
Did you get involved in the community while you were out there?
What did you like most about coaching Little League?
What didn't you like?
Were parents very supportive?**

Be prepared with a set of questions that will help establish suitability, but be flexible enough to follow a logical, naturally flowing discussion. Keep in mind that you're trying to build a profile of the volunteer's behavior. This will indicate how well he or she will perform as a youth leader. People do change, but usually very slowly or as a result of significant life events. Marriage and children can have a dramatic impact on some, and do little for others.

Source: *How to Get the Right People: Screening Interviews (Part A and Part B)* (Bryon Milliere, May 1997, *The Leader Magazine*).

What if?

Use open-ended questions. Those requiring more than a "yes" or a "no" draw out opinions, attitudes and reactions to typical situations. Explore areas such as the candidate's attitude towards children, discipline strategies, reasons for volunteering, and expectations from Scouting. A person's motivations for giving up several hours each week can tell much about personal intentions. Here are some examples of questions you could ask:

- What experience do you have working with children?
- What did you do when kids acted up at church camp?
- How would you describe children aged eight to ten?
- What did you enjoy about the day outings with the Beavers?
- What are you looking forward to about being a Cub leader?
Do you have any concerns?
- Balance your questions with feedback. Take opportunities to clarify misunderstandings about the nature of the role. Reinforce valid expectations and positive answers with encouraging statements like these:
 - "You sure seem to understand this age group."
 - "I like your enthusiasm."
 - "Your experience would be a real help in this area."

How do you know when people are telling the truth?

Few potential leaders are willing to agree to a lie detector test and truth serum may have some side effects. Even professional interviewers will tell you that no process is fool-proof.

Don't be discouraged. The experts do have some advice to improve your abilities beyond what your gut tells you. The questions and approach outlined in Part A of this article explained how to establish rapport, how to build a profile and how to ask open-ended questions. Part B will help you deal with responses (both good and bad) to your questions, and help you recognize body language and risk indicators.

When preparing for the interview be sure to review the position's job description. Consider the attitude, skills and knowledge of the person who would be successful in the job. Focus the questions on confirming the candidate's match with the role.

Even while establishing rapport and building a profile of the candidate's background, interviewers should be asking themselves this question: Can we picture the candidate in the job? If you feel unsure about the match, try to identify what is causing that uncertainty. First impressions are often reliable, however, they aren't guaranteed character gauges.

Ticking Bombs

"One of the biggest mistakes interviewers make," says Paddy Bowen, Executive Director of Volunteer Canada, "is letting a 'bomb' lie (silent and unexplored)." For example, if the interviewed candidate says something like, "I love being alone with children. I think that they are the only people who really understand me," don't let the comment end there. Probe into what the candidate means. Eliminate all doubts in your mind. Don't proceed to the next question on your list. Be prepared for unexpected information that bubble up that might indicate serious problems.

A candidate with something to hide may not answer your questions directly or not at all. Instead the person may send the conversation in a completely different direction to avoid answering the question. If you feel you are being diverted, simply ask the question again or rephrase it to be more specific.

Besides gathering facts, we are also interested in assessing maturity, sense of judgment, patience, tact, sensitivity to others, prejudice, rigidity or flexibility, ability to work with others and handle problems. These are sometimes tough to assess, but we need to use our best judgment. Your good or uneasy feeling might relate to some of these qualities. A person with an average ability in these areas should make you feel comfortable in the way they interact with you, the way they describe their dealings with others and the level of responsibility they accept for their circumstances.

Warning Signs!

Here are some warning signs to watch for:

- o Unaccountable gaps in personal history
- o An avoidance to answering questions
- o An over-interest in children, or a lack of adult relationships
- o Belief that hitting children is okay
- o A greater interest in what they will get out of the program than in development of youth.

The following indicators demonstrate poor suitability

- o Prejudice towards certain groups of people
- o Harsh or inappropriate language in conversation
- o Questioning the need to have reference to God in the Promise
- o Lack of time for volunteering and training
- o Inability to work as a member of a team

You may resolve some of these suitability indicators to your satisfaction through further probing (e.g. the individual's belief in God or a flexible level of involvement to accommodate other commitments). Don't let them pass by until you are content.

Source: How to Get the Right People: Screening Interviews (Part A and Part B) (Bryon Milliere, May 1997, The Leader Magazine).

To Tell the Truth

Watching body language and eye movements are common ways to assess a person's truthfulness. Be aware, though, of cultural and personal differences. Not everyone reacts the same. Remember back to when you were initially building rapport with this person. It will provide clues as to how this candidate uses body language when he or she is both nervous and relaxed.

"If somebody's relaxed and you're asking open-ended questions, giving lots of time to answer," says Chuck Lawrence (instructor, Ontario Police College), "their head and hand movements will mirror their words. If someone catches a four foot fish, it's natural to say, 'It was this big!' (motioning with hands). Watch for cases where the body language doesn't match what's coming out of the mouth. Look too for eye movements. Somebody who's relaxed and telling a story, tends to go into autopilot mode: They look up to the right or left to recall information. Though not overly concerned with you, they will check back with you from time to time to make sure you're following them."

"On the other hand," says Chuck Lawrence, "in my experience, somebody who is lying will often maintain very intense eye contact. They are really intent on following you to see whether or not you are 'buying' what they are selling you."

Would I...?

If you do feel uneasy about responses you're getting, always follow-up with additional questions until the doubts go away or until the doubts grow into mountains.

Try asking yourself this question: Would I be comfortable sending my own child to a program involving this person? Whatever you decide, ask yourself "why" you feel that way. This process will help identify the source of those uncomfortable gut feelings so you can confirm or reject them.

As well, take note of areas of concern you have that should be pursued during reference checks.

Pleasant Conclusions

At the end of a successful interview, you'll usually feel excited; you'll be able to picture this person in the Scouting role because his or her answers matched with the attitude, skills and knowledge you were looking for. The candidate, too, will often be excited about the group's mission and vision. At this point, checking the candidates references may seem like an unnecessary formality, but remember: checking references is an important and necessary step.

Conclude the interview by thanking the candidate and explaining the next steps. If you feel really good about their involvement, be enthusiastic about the timeline. When you have some concerns, you may wish to be vague and noncommittal.

Finding excellent leaders isn't always easy, but it is vital. Don't take any shortcuts. Our youth deserve the best.

Source: How to Get the Right People: Screening Interviews (Part A and Part B) (Bryon Milliere May 1997, The Leader Magazine).

Key Interview Questions for Volunteers/Staff who work with Youth

How would you describe yourself? Be alert for someone who indicates extreme shyness or who is withdrawn or passive.

2. **When you read the position description, what appealed to you most?** Look for the required skills and qualifications. Also look for shyness, passiveness or high interest in one-on-one activities with children.
3. **What specific skills do you bring to the position?** A backup question to the previous question.
4. **With what age group or sex do you prefer to work? Why?** This question is helpful in making an appropriate placement and properly utilizing experience and skills. This question also may determine if there is undue interest in young children. Listen for statements about how easy it is to work with young children or that they are "clean," "innocent", and so on. Also listen for negative statements about teenagers or adults, as compared to young children.
5. **Give examples of your experience with this age group (and sex) of children.** A backup to the previous question.
6. **If you were trained, are you willing to work with other age groups? The other sex?** A second backup to the question.

What kinds of programs or activities would you prefer to supervise or conduct? This will help in making a good job match, but be alert for high interest in one-on-one activities with children that may not be supervised.

8. **If given training, are you willing to supervise or conduct other programs or activities?** A backup to the previous question.
9. **What do you feel are the chief indicators of a successful program or activity?** Try to determine the applicant's compatibility with the camp's organizational goals and objectives.
10. **Give a specific example of how you overcame a problem with a youngster other than your own.** A backup to the previous question. Child molesters often side with the child. The question may also indicate whether the applicant's disciplinary style is consistent with the camp's.
11. **Under what kind of supervisory style do you best function?** This question will determine whether the applicant fits into the camp work environment; it may also indicate any passiveness or non-assertiveness on the applicant's part.
12. **What would you like to tell us that has not been discussed already?** This is a vital question. Let the person talk, and listen carefully.

Source: *Camp Director's Guide: Preventing Sexual Exploitation of Children* (John Patterson, 1988, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children)

- 13. What questions do you have about the organization?** No doubt such subjects as salary, benefits, and camp policies will be discussed. Be alert for more discussion about the chance to work with a specific age group, sex, activity, and so on.

Suggestions for Conducting Reference Checks

No personnel selection process is complete without a thorough reference check. This includes a check of past employers, personal references and, where possible, a criminal records check. In checking past employers and personal references, do not simply send a form to be filled out and returned. A contact by telephone provides the opportunity to obtain "subliminal" information from the employer's tone of voice, attitude, and candor. In addition, it gives the camp director the opportunity to probe deeper and clarify responses.

In making the telephone contact, the camp director should inquire about the nature of the relationship the applicant has with the reference:

- Was the reference a direct supervisor or a personnel officer? You should talk with the supervisor if possible. If the applicant worked with children, explore how the applicant dealt with the children as well as other staff members.
- If the applicant did not work with children, how did he deal with coworkers?
- Was there any contact with children, what was its nature, and in what way did the applicant handle it?
- How did other staff work with the applicant?

The camp director should determine if any information from the references differs from that obtained from the interview with the applicant. Once more, the camp director should be alert to the identifying behaviors of the preferential child molester and look for patterns that could be the cause for concern. An evasive response by the reference could be due to a faulty memory, or it could be due to reluctance to discuss a less-than-satisfactory working relationship. The interviewer should also be cautious about effusive recommendations. Someone who is "too good to be true", generally is!

The following phrases are helpful in formulating questions for the applicant's references

Would you describe...
 I wonder if you would tell me...
 How did I happen that...
 What were some of the ways in which...
 I'd like to know more about...
 What would you say...

In order to develop the information further, use these follow-up questions

Could you tell me more about that?
 Could you explain that in more detail?
 I'd like to hear more about that.
 Can you give me a "for instance"?
 I'd be interested in knowing...
 I'm not certain that I understand...

Source: Camp Director's Guide: Preventing Sexual Exploitation of Children (John Patterson, 1988, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children)

**Perhaps you can clarify...
What prompted your decision to..
How did you happen to...**

After verifying the information on the application, the camp director should probe further in the areas of the applicant's personality and behavior. These key questions, prepared by the Boys Clubs of America will be of use:

How would you describe his personal characteristics? (Determine whether the applicant is an immature, withdrawn, shy or nonassertive person, has difficulty making decisions, or is generally obedient to all requests.)

2. Would you say that the applicant identifies with children in any way? (Determine whether or not the applicant relinquishes the adult role and responsibilities, tends to identify with children, or places a premium on one-on-one activities with children rather than group activities.)

I'd be interested in knowing if you think there may be any problems or conditions that would interfere with the applicant's ability to care for children or that in any way would endanger the children under the applicant's care. These problems include substance abuse, mental illness, emotional disturbance, or a history of physical or sexual abuse of children. Listen carefully to the answer to this critical question—not only to the words, but to how the words are said. Hesitancy or undue caution may indicate a less-than-candid response.

4. If practical and legal considerations permit, make every effort to conduct a complete criminal history background check on every potential camp staff member. Nearly half the states have enacted legislation providing employers access to the criminal history records of the state for screening individuals working with youth. Camp directors should check with the law-enforcement authorities in their locale to determine the extent that such records may be accessed.