



# Environmental Traveling Companions Youth LEAD Program *Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)*

Feel free to contact **Yoseline Castillo**, the Youth LEAD Program Manager, with any further questions at [ylp@etctrips.org](mailto:ylp@etctrips.org).

**To access the 2025 YLP Application form, [click here!](#) Haga clic [aquí](#) para la solicitud en español!**

## **What does family/parent involvement look like before the course?**

**ETC is hosting a [required virtual orientation meeting for all accepted students and parents/guardians a few days before their course start.](#)** During this meeting students and families will learn important details about the course itinerary, meet their Instructors, review the packing list, and ask any questions. Students and families will receive the Zoom link for the Orientation Meeting in their acceptance email (along with a packing list and general itinerary).

Parents will also get to meet the ETC team when they drop off their students on Course Start day, and on Graduation Day.

Students will each call home towards the end of their course (1-3 days before Graduation).

## **Will students have access to their cell phones during the course?**

Students disconnect from electronic devices during YLP courses so that they can immerse themselves in nature, community, self-reflection, healing, and transformation! Students will not have their cell phones or any electronic devices (tablets, AirPods, video game consoles, etc.) for the entirety of the course. Phones and electronic devices will be collected by ETC staff on Course Start Day and returned on Graduation day; they will be kept in a safe location at the ETC office.

Instructors will have their cell phones and a satellite device for emergencies and other communications with ETC office staff. Students will call home a few days before the end of the course (around ~5 minutes per student) to check in with loved ones.

**Will ETC be intentional about taking photos of students on the trip, especially since students won't have their phone?**

Yes! Instructors take photos on their phones, and each course has a point-and-shoot waterproof camera that students can take turns using throughout their trip. All photos are then uploaded to a Google Photos album and shared with students.

**Can the application be completed on Chromebooks?** Yes.

**The application can also be completed on a smartphone. Steps to complete the Participation Packet attachment via smartphone:**

- Complete all parts of the YLP application first, then go to section 7
- Download the Participation Packet from section 7 of the [YLP Application](#)
- Open the Participation Packet on the Google Docs app (*note: applicants will need the Google Drive and Google Docs app downloaded on their phones*)
  - On an iPhone, once the Participation Packet is downloaded it will automatically open as a PDF on Safari. Click the "share" button on the bottom of the screen (looks like an arrow coming out of a box) and select the Google Drive option
  - On the Google Drive app, search for "YLP Participation Form Packet" and open it
  - Click the button on the bottom of the screen that says "Fill out the form" with a pencil icon next to it
  - Save all edits on Google Drive
  - Download your completed Participation Packet to the phone:
    - Open the Participation Packet on Google Drive. Click the three buttons on the top right of the screen
    - Click "Open with"
    - Click "Save in Files" -- remember where you saved it to complete the next step!
  - To upload your completed Participation Packet to the YLP Application (*I recommend saving this uploading step until the very end, when the student is ready to submit the application*)

- Open your YLP Application form
  - Scroll to the Participation Packet section (section #7)
  - Click “Choose file” and upload the file from wherever you saved it on your phone
- Double (triple!) check that all your application is filled out completely, and click “submit” when you’re ready! :)

### **How long would you say the application takes to complete in full?**

If the applicant knows all of their information, it should take an hour or so. If they need to check in with their family about any information (e.g. medical history), it may take longer.

The short answer section doesn’t need to be lengthy – three or four sentences per question is enough. We mainly want to learn more about why the student is interested in joining the course and how we can support them.

### **Does ETC require a physical with a doctor, or just filling out the Participation Packet (medical information)?**

ETC no longer requires a physical with a doctor from every applicant. If a student has a special circumstance (e.g. a severe injury or medical condition), then we may ask for a doctor's note to confirm that the course would be safe for them to participate in.

### **Is there anything in a student’s medical or mental health history that could be disqualifying?**

It is rare to have an immediate disqualification. ETC staff first follows up with a phone call with the student and/or family member regarding medical and mental health concerns. In some cases we may ask for a doctor’s note. After learning more from the student, their family, and/or their doctor, we do our best to determine whether our instructors would be properly equipped to support the student through their expedition.

Example conditions that may require a doctor’s note: recent severe injury or surgery, severe depression or anxiety.

### **Are there weight considerations for kayaking?**

Unfortunately, we are not prepared to accommodate all sizes with our kayaking and rafting gear due to safety considerations at this time. We use traditional sit-in kayaks, which require folks to be able to come in and out of the cockpit quickly, especially in the rare event of needing a rescue.

Every person and every body is different, so there is not a hard limit on weight. Our guideline is that if a person is over 250lbs, we will contact the student to see if our gear (e.g. personal flotation devices) can accommodate them. For example, they may come in and try on our gear, or they may be asked to send their measurements to be sure that our safety gear will fit properly.

We are currently working on this and trying to find ways to accommodate everyone. Our mission is to be accessible to everyone, and we are doing research to get safe and comfortable gear for all that also aligns with our programming.

### **What recommendations do you have for students who aren't currently active? How many miles can they expect to walk?**

On a backpacking course they'll typically be hiking 4-7 miles per day, with some elevation gain and at a pace that is suited to the group's needs. Students will all be carrying large backpacks with their own clothes and sleeping bag, as well as a share of the group gear and group food.

To prepare, students can take regular walks starting a handful of weeks before their trip, gradually incorporating a heavy backpack to their walks. For example, they can walk 1 mile every day without a backpack for five days, then walk 1 mile every day with a heavy backpack for five days, and then increase the length of their walk gradually.

Any activity is great – whatever is accessible to the student, so that they can do it regularly leading up to their course, is what will benefit them most!

### **Is there a course for students who don't want to go backpacking?**

The **14-Day Access to Adventure Course** is a kayaking and rafting only course. This course is made to accommodate students of all abilities!

### **How much swimming experience does one need for an ETC trip?**

Students don't need any swimming experience to participate in the YLP Course. We have had many non-swimmers in the past! Students might end up in the water unintentionally, and should be comfortable being immersed while wearing a Personal Flotation Device (PFD). When students are kayaking, rafting, or playing in water, they will be wearing PFDs that keep them afloat whether they can swim or not. PFDs are required at all times when in the water during the kayaking and rafting portions of every course. An instructor will always be present when students are swimming.

Before embarking on their sea kayaking adventure, we host a skills day on the second day of each course. Students learn about parts of the kayak, get comfortable in their gear, and practice kayaking on a short paddle nearby. We are no longer holding practice rescues on this day – students can opt into practice rescues during their sea kayak component.

During backpacking sections where we don't carry PFDs: When students arrive at the first lake/body of water of the trip, they can participate in a swim test if they would like to swim without a PFD. The swim test is for students who have previous swimming skills. Non-swimmers are allowed to play in the water up to their knees. An instructor will always be monitoring when students are in the water.

### **ETC is known for cultivating strong emotional connections during courses. How often do these connection/community sessions occur?**

The instructors and students participate in an evening meeting every night: a group member poses a question and everyone is given a chance to share their thoughts and experiences. Students are not required to share and they can pass every night if they want to.

Evening meeting it is a great space for all members of the group to express what they're feeling and going through. This space can be freeing and a rare time when students can express themselves authentically, since a culture of respect and care is actively cultivated in all of our courses.

### **Have you ever had students who didn't feel prepared enough and wanted to leave? How do you address that? How do you keep them motivated?**

Almost every student feels some amount of homesickness or experiences challenges during their course. Each student and situation is different and is tended to on a case-by-case basis. Instructors first talk with the student to try to get a sense of what they're grappling with and what kind of support they need. Instructors encourage the student to continue trying on the

experience, taking it day by day, cooking comforting meals when possible, and building community with the group. We do our best to support the student through difficult emotions rather than pulling them out of the expedition at the first sign of homesickness or challenge. Part of the transformation of a Youth LEAD course happens when participants come out the other side of challenges and discomfort, so we do our best to pay attention to each student's personal needs and limits.

If this is a recurring pattern with a student and they really don't want to continue, there is a process for that student to come off the trip. Our activities are local to the Bay Area (furthest is Sierra Nevada), so depending on where the course is we can build a plan to get them back home before graduation. Depending on where the course currently is, it may not be possible to get them home right away: if they're in the middle of their kayaking portion on Tomales Bay or backpacking in the Sierras, they will need to wait until the group returns to their entry/exit point in order to be picked up by family.

### **Students have experienced homesickness on past trips. What is ETC's recommendation to support with homesickness?**

Set clear expectations of what the course will be like - this is a good idea overall, and not just to help alleviate homesickness! There is ample information on [our website](#) about each course including photos, itinerary outlines, and student testimonials. A few videos to check out:

- ETC [sea kayaking experience here!](#)
- ETC [whitewater rafting experience here!](#)
- ETC [Youth LEAD Program experience here!](#)

Feel free to reach out to Isa (contact information below) if you have any additional questions.

On the course, students can bring a small trinket that reminds them of home (not something extremely valuable since there is a chance the item could get lost or damaged). Students can also bring a small notebook with messages from loved ones, or printed pictures.

### **Do students ever ask to bring snacks? What is ETC's policy about this?**

Yes, students have brought snacks. If their snacks are contained to a small Ziploc bag, that's fine; anything bigger will add too much bulk to the student's gear. We recognize that familiar foods and treats can be a huge source of comfort!

**What are your COVID protocols?**

We are strongly recommending vaccines because a positive COVID case on a course could potentially end the course early. However, they are not required.

We will be asking for **proof of a negative rapid test within 24 hours of the first course day**. Students will bring their negative rapid test result (or a photo of it), which will be noted on our check-in roster on Course Start day.

**How can we get in touch with you for additional questions or concerns?**

**Yoseline** can be reached during business hours at [ylp@etctrips.org](mailto:ylp@etctrips.org) or (415) 474-7662 ext. 16.