



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.

To access the 2026 YLP Application form, please check out our website at:
<https://etctrips.org/adventures/youth-lead-program/> (Scroll down to APPLY NOW HERE)

1. What does family/parent involvement look like before the course?

ETC will host a required virtual orientation for all accepted students and their parents or guardians a few days before the course begins. During this meeting, participants will learn important details about the course itinerary, meet their Instructors, review the packing list, and have the opportunity to ask questions. The Zoom link for the Orientation Meeting, along with the packing list and general itinerary, will be included in each student's acceptance email.

Parents will also have the chance to meet the ETC team in person on Course Start Day during student drop-off, as well as on Graduation Day. As part of our program framework, parents are not permitted to have direct contact with their student during the course unless this communication is coordinated with the Program Manager first or needed for an emergency. We understand that this can be challenging, and we encourage families to stay connected by writing letters directed to their loved one. Students will also be encouraged to do the same. These letters can be emailed directly to the Program Manager, and additional information about this process is provided in each student's acceptance packet.

Toward the end of the course (*typically one to three days before Graduation*) every student will make a brief call home to remind their loved ones about the upcoming ceremony. Graduation is celebrated in a potluck style, and families are encouraged to bring a favorite dish or treat to help mark the completion of their student's journey.

2. Will students have access to their cell phones during the course?

No, students are disconnected 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 and will be returned at the end of the graduation ceremony.

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.

3. 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. There will be a slideshow of the best photos taken by students during the graduation ceremony.

4. 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). Students will have the opportunity to be exposed to water with the support of their instructors throughout the entire course. 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. During the skills days, students can also opt into practicing self rescues with the support of knowledgeable guides and instructors. 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.

5. Are there weight considerations for kayaking?

Unfortunately, we are not currently able to accommodate all body sizes with our kayaking and rafting gear due to safety requirements. We use traditional sit-in kayaks, which require participants to enter and exit the seat (cockpit) quickly, especially in the rare event of needing a rescue.

Because every person and every body is different, we do not set a strict weight limit. However, as a general guideline, if a participant weighs over 250 pounds, we will reach out to determine whether our gear—such as personal flotation devices—can safely and comfortably fit them. In some cases, students may be invited to try on the equipment in person, or they may be asked to provide measurements to ensure proper fit.

We are actively working to expand our accessibility and are researching options for safe, comfortable gear that aligns with our program. Our mission is to make our courses accessible to everyone, and we are committed to improving our equipment to better serve all students.

6. Is there a course for students who don't want to go backpacking?

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

7. 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 gradually increase the length of their walk.

Any consistent physical activity is helpful. The most important thing is that students choose activities that are accessible and manageable for them and that they can practice regularly leading up to their course.

8. 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. A photo of a negative test result can also be emailed to the YLP program manager at: ylp@etctrips.org, please make sure to include student names and course name.

9. What if a student needs to go see a doctor during a course?

In the rare event that a student needs to see a medical professional, instructors will coordinate a visit to the nearest hospital or clinic. Parents and Program Managers will be kept informed throughout the entire process. All instructors are certified in basic First Aid, and all Lead Instructors hold advanced wilderness medicine certifications or Wilderness First Responder Certification. Most medical visits have been for minor issues—for example, students experiencing constipation due to dehydration.

Open-enrollment students will use the medical insurance information provided in their Participation Packet. Summer Search students are covered under Summer Search's insurance. Our goal is to minimize any financial burden on families. If a student does not have medical insurance, ETC is willing to cover the cost of one medical visit.

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

The instructors and students hold an evening meeting every night, during which a group member poses a question and everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences. Students are never required to speak and may choose to pass on sharing any night. These evening meetings provide a safe and supportive space for all group members to express their feelings and experiences. They can be a rare opportunity for students to speak authentically, and create a culture of respect and care that is actively cultivated during their journey together.

11. 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 experiences some degree of homesickness or emotional challenge during their course. Because each student's needs are different, instructors address every situation on a case-by-case basis. They begin by talking with the student to understand what they are feeling and what kind of support would be most helpful. Students are encouraged to take things one day at a time, stay engaged in the experience, and continue giving their best effort.

To help ease homesickness, students may be encouraged to write letters to their loved ones, which are mailed during transition days. They are also welcome to bring photos from home. In many cases, creating intentional space for students to share about their families and feelings with their peers becomes one of the most effective ways to process homesickness. Supportive group conversations, comforting meals when possible, and the natural community that forms on course all help students move through difficult emotions. Our goal is to support them through these challenges—not to remove them from the expedition at the first sign of discomfort. A core element of the Youth LEAD experience is the transformation that occurs when students work through adversity and discover their own resilience.

If a student shows a recurring pattern of distress and ultimately does not want to continue, there is a process in place for them to leave the course. Because our expeditions run locally within the Bay Area and occasionally as far as the Sierra Nevada, we can typically coordinate a plan for a parent to pick up a student home from the field. However, immediate pickup may not always be possible. For example, if the group is in the middle of the kayaking portion on Tomales Bay or backpacking in the Sierras, the student will need to wait until the team returns to a designated entry or exit point before a family member can meet them.

12. Students have experienced homesickness on past trips. What is ETC's recommendation to support 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 YLP program manager (contact information below) if you have any additional questions.

13. Do students ever ask to bring snacks? What is ETC's policy on this?

Yes, students do sometimes bring snacks. They may bring a small amount of snacks as long as everything fits into a single Ziploc bag. Anything larger becomes too bulky and adds unnecessary weight to their gear. We understand that familiar foods and treats can offer comfort, especially during challenging moments, so a small selection of personal snacks is perfectly acceptable within these limits.

14. I am concerned about the ongoing ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids across California and would like to know what ETC is doing to support students while they are away from home.

This issue has been on our hearts and minds consistently, and we recognize the emotional and physical stress these raids cause for the communities affected.

At ETC, we are actively working to stay informed, prepared, and responsive to any situation that may arise. As an organization, we have partnered with other organizations and volunteers to provide legal guidance and information regarding documentation processes and important hotlines. All ETC instructors receive training to be aware of potential risks and to know how to respond if they encounter challenging situations in the field.

It's important to understand that while we take all precautions, we cannot guarantee that incidents won't occur. ICE raids have happened in workplaces, homes, public areas, and other settings, sometimes affecting individuals who are not the intended targets. Recently, raids have become more frequent in communities of color, particularly in grocery stores and densely populated areas and neighborhoods. The fear this creates within migrant communities is real and deeply felt.

If a situation arises, instructors are trained to immediately move students to a safe location, such as ETC's private River Camp property, and contact the Program Manager for further support. Depending on the circumstances, contacting an appropriate hotline may also be advised. We educate staff and students about "Know Your Rights" guidelines, which are valuable for anyone confronted by ICE and can also be shared with family members:

If you are confronted by an ICE agent, you have the right to:

- ★ Remain silent, don't answer any questions other than your name.
- ★ Don't open your door unless they show you a valid judicial warrant. (if no warrant) ask for supporting documentation (e.g., warrants/ subpoena)
- ★ Don't sign anything, insist on speaking with your attorney first.
- ★ Always stay calm, never run or physically resist. Do not lie. You can document/ record the interaction or ask bystanders to document or record for you.

In the field, if a student expresses concerns about ICE, instructors are instructed to create a safe space for them to share their feelings and to reassure them that students, instructors, and families have constitutional rights, regardless of immigration status. Most raids occur in urban areas, making targeted raids in outdoor park spaces very uncommon. These are frightening times, and we want everyone to know that they are not alone.

ETC will continue to educate ourselves and our community while sharing resources with students, families, and community members to ensure safety, knowledge, and support. We have compiled a resource document with additional information that can be shared widely; see it [here](#). Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns.

Questions About the Application Process

15. Can the MAIN application be completed on a Chromebook?

Yes, the application can be completed on a Chromebook or a smartphone. Students using a smartphone can follow the provided steps to complete all required sections. The application allows students to pause and return later, and it can be helpful to complete it with a parent or guardian to ensure all information is accurate. Once a student is accepted to a course, they will receive a final liability form that requires parent or guardian signatures. Additional information will be provided on their acceptance packet.

16. How long does the application take to complete?

If the applicant already knows all of their information, the application typically takes 1-2 hours. It may take longer if they need to check with their family for details such as medical history. The short-answer responses do not need to be lengthy; three to four sentences per question is sufficient. These questions simply help us learn why the student is interested in the course and how we can best support them.

17. Does ETC require a physical exam, or just the medical information in the Participation Packet?

A physical exam is no longer required for every applicant. In certain cases—such as a recent serious injury or a significant medical condition—we may request a doctor's note to ensure that the student can safely participate or follow up with a parent/ student. **It is important that each applicant completes the medical section of the Participation Packet with a parent or guardian and provides as much detail as possible.** This helps our instructors understand each student's health needs, especially those who require medical support. Students will also be asked to list an emergency contact who can be reached at any time should we need to contact a parent or guardian during the course.

18. Can anything in a student's medical or mental health history be disqualifying?

It is rare for a student to be immediately disqualified. If medical or mental health concerns arise, ETC staff will follow up with a phone call to the student and/or their family. In some situations, we may ask for a doctor's note. After gathering information from the student, their family, and possibly their doctor, we determine whether our instructors are equipped to safely and effectively support the student during the expedition. Examples of conditions that may require a doctor's note include recent severe injuries or surgeries and severe anxiety or depression.

19. Can we get in touch with you for additional questions or concerns?

Absolutely, The YLP Program Manager, Yoseline can be reached during business hours at ylp@etctrips.org or (415) 474-7662 ext. 16