

PEOPLE OF COLOR OUTDOORS Hike Leader Handbook



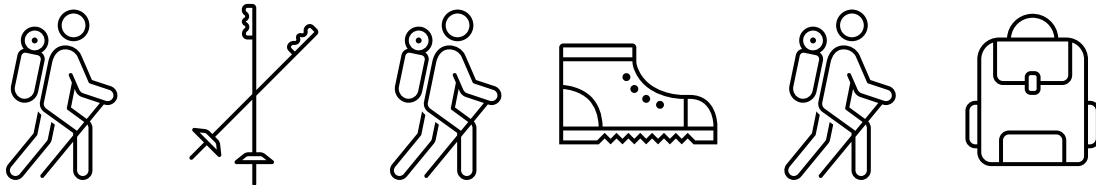
This handbook belongs to _____

Welcome to POCO Hiking Leadership!



Thank you for stepping up as a POCO Hike Leader! Your leadership ensures our hikes are not only enjoyable but also safe and well organized for all members. As a leader, you are an ambassador for our community, helping to foster an inclusive and welcoming hiking environment. This manual is designed to guide you through your responsibilities, best practices, and safety protocols to ensure every hike is a success.

A Special Note: Many POCO members are new to hiking, so your patience, guidance, and encouragement are essential. You are not only leading a hike, but you are also creating a space where people can build confidence, learn about nature, and enjoy the outdoors.



Role of a POCO Hike Leader

Your role as a hike leader extends beyond just guiding people along a trail. You are responsible for:

Leading in Pairs: Hikes should always be led by two leaders whenever possible if there are more than five participants. If a second leader is unavailable, ask for a volunteer to walk at the rear to ensure no one gets left behind and that everyone is included.

Planning and Organizing: Selecting appropriate routes, assessing conditions, and ensuring they match the skill levels of participants. This information will also be shared in the Meetup description of the event.

Clear Communication: Sharing key details with participants ahead of time, including start time, meeting location, difficulty level, required gear, expected weather conditions, whether appropriate for children, if lunches should be packed, if it's ok to bring a pet.

Safety and Risk Management: Conducting pre-hike safety briefings, identifying potential hazards, and ensuring participants are properly prepared. Have everyone sign a liability/photo waiver.

Group Management: Keep the group together, maintain a comfortable pace, and perform regular headcounts, stop for breathing, photo, check-ins to ensure everyone feels like a part of the community.

Emergency Preparedness: Carrying a first aid kit, having an emergency action plan, and being familiar with the nearest exit points and medical facilities.

Environmental Stewardship: We encourage Leave No Trace principles, respecting city parks, sidewalks, and trails, and ensuring participants do not litter.

Creating an Enjoyable Experience: Make hikes fun, engaging, and inclusive for all members, ensuring that both new and experienced hikers feel welcome and want to return.

Educate and Share Knowledge: If you are familiar with the area, share its history, notable landmarks, cultural significance, and Indigenous heritage.

Pet and Child Safety: Remind participants to always watch their children and, if pets are present, to keep them on a leash and clean up after them.

Waivers and Permissions: Collect and/or pass out liability forms and photo waivers. Verbally confirm that participants are comfortable with being photographed in addition to obtaining the signed waiver. Remind people to step away from the group if they want to avoid photos.

Planning the Hike

Choose a route that matches the description that you posted on Meetup.

If applicable, be mindful of street crossings, busy intersections, and accessibility for strollers and mobility aids. All members must stick with the group and not take shortcuts on their own. Check the weather forecast.

Plan for stopping points where members can take a break, take photos, enjoy the surroundings, or learn something about the area.

Consider the needs of participants – is this a good hike for children? Starting at what age? Are pets allowed? Will there be bathrooms?

Research local events or city ordinances that may affect the route.

Communicating with Participants

Send out hike details at least 48 hours before the scheduled event.

Provide information on meeting location, distance, estimated duration, and any notable points of interest.

Recommend comfortable walking shoes, weather-appropriate clothing, and water bottles.

Ensure participants sign and return liability and photo waivers before the hike begins.

Remind participants that POCO is an inclusive community and that respect and patience for members with all backgrounds and all skill levels are expected.

Leading the Hike



Standing in a Circle: Gather everyone in a circle before the walk begins to create a sense of connection and unity.

Land Acknowledgment: Begin each hike by acknowledging the Indigenous tribes that have historically cared for and lived on the land. If unsure, research or consult local resources.

POCO's Story: Share briefly about how and why POCO started, emphasizing its mission of inclusivity and community-building through outdoor activities.

Fun Icebreaker: Encourage participants to introduce themselves with a fun icebreaker, such as, “What do you like best so far about Portland,” or “What is an activity or hike that you would like to experience with POCO?”

Walk Overview: Go over the plan, including distance, pace, and stopping points of interest. Remind people to let you know if they need rest.

Safety Reminders: Emphasize the importance of staying together at crossings, watching for bikes and vehicles, and following city traffic signals.

Pet and Child Safety: Remind parents to watch their children and ensure pets remain on a leash and do not disrupt other pedestrians.

Photo Permissions: If you plan to take photos, confirm with the group that they are comfortable being included in pictures, even if they have signed the photo waiver.

Rear Volunteer: If there is only one leader, ask for a volunteer to walk at the back of the group to ensure no one is left behind.

On the Hike:

Set a welcoming pace. Begin the walk with a comfortable, conversational style so no one feels rushed or left behind. Make space for all walking styles and energy levels. The goal isn't speed, it's connection with all members, and having a shared experience.

Make the journey meaningful. Pause at points of interest, whether it's a mural with a story, a historic tree, a community garden, or a bird's nest. Share a few insights or fun facts. Let these stops become moments to learn, reflect, and appreciate the layers of the community we're walking through. Ask questions and invite stories.

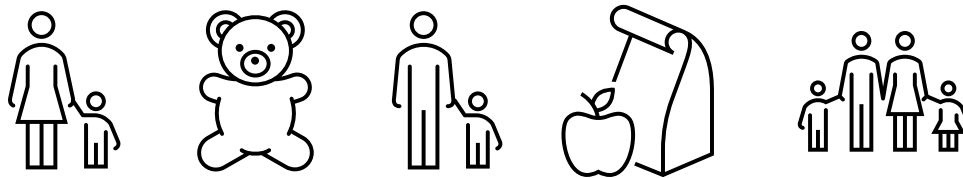
Create space to rest and reset. Plan for short breaks at designated points where people can rehydrate, stretch, just take a breather, and take photos. This keeps everyone energized and ensures the experience stays enjoyable from start to finish.

Prioritize safety and accessibility. Stay alert to your surroundings. Watch for tree roots, rocks, and holes on the trail. Make sure everyone can navigate the route and offer support when needed.

Encourage conversation and curiosity. Invite participants to engage in the walk by asking open-ended questions. Point out interesting sights and encourage others to share what they know or love about the area. The hike becomes richer when it's shaped by collective knowledge and stories.

Support newcomers to nature. When walking in forested or natural areas, take time to introduce the basics: point out common native plants, bird calls, or animal tracks. Share simple tips like how to walk quietly, look up, and notice small movements or changes in the landscape.

Honor BIPOC history and presence. Acknowledge the original stewards of the land you're walking on. If possible, learn and share the name(s) of the Indigenous people who lived and still live, in the area. Talk about their ongoing connection to the land and encourage respectful reflection. If you know about the connection to the land experienced by other groups, share that, also.



Making it Fun for Kids:

Encourage children to be trail explorers, letting them lead for short distances or find fun landmarks.

Organize scavenger hunts with simple prompts like "Find a red leaf" or "Spot a bird."

Let kids collect small, natural objects like interesting leaves or stones and have them create art on the ground (but remind them to leave things behind at the end of the hike).

Introduce simple challenges like balancing on a curb, hopping between cracks in the sidewalk, or imagining how various trees and plants might help birds, insects, soil, the environment, or people, and why they think that. For instance, in the fall a child might guess that red leaves could be used to dye fabric, or in the spring moss could be used as a bed.

Compliment and recognize children for their curiosity and participation, reminding them that their perspectives are valued.

Assign fun "roles" to kids, like "Animal Tracker" (looking for birds or squirrels) or "Pathfinder" (watching for trail signs) or "Clue Spotter (who made that poop?).

Take Photos: Stop along the way and take special care to capture each child in a photo that they will treasure, along with their family. Do ensure that those who opted out of photos are not included. 📷

Handling Emergencies



On the Hike: Safety & Support for Mixed-Age, Mixed-Ability Groups

Leading family hikes means being ready for anything from scraped knees to emotional overwhelm to safety challenges in public space. Here's guidance for handling common situations with care and confidence:

Minor Issues & First Aid

Blisters, scrapes, bug bites, or small falls are common on family hikes. Carry a well-stocked first aid kit including:

- Band-aids (various sizes)

- Antiseptic wipes

- Moleskin or blister pads

- Tweezers for splinters or ticks

- Extra water and sunscreen

If someone is uncomfortable, stop the group for a break. Reassure kids and adults alike. Normalize needing a moment or asking for help.

Assign a co-leader or volunteer to help one-on-one if a participant needs to walk slower or rest while the group pauses.

Serious Medical Emergencies

If a participant experiences a serious issue like a fall with possible head injury, breathing problems, chest pain, or severe allergic reaction, **call 911 immediately**.

Remain calm and stay with the individual. Keep them still and comfortable if possible.

Designate someone to guide emergency services to your location. If you're in a park or trail system, know in advance how to describe where you are.

Consider designating one adult to quietly move children away from the scene to reduce distress.

Lost Participant

Stop the group immediately. Check if the person stepped aside for a break, fell behind, or turned back early. Quietly ask who saw them last, and when.

Call or text their phone if they have one. Send one adult back along the route with a buddy to check for them.

If they are not located within a few minutes, or if a child is missing, **notify local authorities or park staff** right away.

Keep the rest of the group calm and together. If appropriate, continue with a modified route while a leader stays to coordinate the search.

Traffic, Trails and Public Space Incidents

Be especially alert when crossing streets, walking near driveways, or sharing space with cyclists or scooters.

Use crosswalks and crossing lights whenever possible. Cross in groups and wait until everyone is safely across before continuing.

If a child or elder struggles to cross quickly, calmly hold traffic as needed or guide them back to the sidewalk.

If there's a near-miss or aggressive driver/cyclist interaction, document what happened and support the participant involved. Prioritize regrouping and restoring a sense of calm.

Emphasize that it's important for everyone to remain on the trails. Potential harm can come from encountering poison oak, poison ivy, ground nesting wasps, ticks, and other hazards off the trail.

Emotional Distress or Overwhelm


Crowds, heat, noise, or unfamiliar environments can be stressful, especially for young children, neurodivergent participants, or those new to group walks.

Notice body language: Is someone lagging, anxious, or withdrawing? Gently check in. Offer breaks or a quieter space if needed.

Model calm and kindness. Reassure both kids and adults that all feelings are valid and everyone belongs here, no matter what their pace or needs are.

Post-Hike Responsibilities:

Confirm that all participants have safely completed the walk. 

Closing Circle: Take a moment to bring the group back into a circle. Invite participants to share their favorite part of the walk, something they learned, or ideas to make future hikes even better. 

Thank everyone again for showing up and participating.

Let everyone know you hope to see them again on future outings.

Encourage anyone interested in becoming a POCO Hike Leader to reach out to **Founder Pamela Slaughter** and provide them with her contact information: phone 503-349-1061, email pamelas@pdxpocoutdoors.com,

Collect feedback and report any safety concerns or incidents to the POCO leadership team.

Encourage members to share photos and experiences to continue a sense of community.

Ensure all liability and photo waivers are collected and sent to Pamela Slaughter at pamelas@pdxpocoutdoors.com, or take to the POCO office and slide under the door if the office is unoccupied.

POCO's address is 8383 NE Sandy Blvd., #435 Portland, OR 97220

WHEN THE HIKE IS FOCUSED ON CHILDREN

Take a moment to keep children and parents safe:

1. Stay on the trail.
2. Remind people that if they somehow get lost, to stay where they are.
3. Tell folks to be sure to speak up if the pace is too fast – don't tell everyone to leave them and that they'll catch up.
4. Be sure to have someone in the front and at the back.
5. Take attendance on a sheet of paper if you need to or assign everyone a buddy to watch out for.
6. Do a tick check when appropriate and remind people to stay on the path and avoid brushing up against plants and shrubs off trail.

Creating Joyful, Safe, and Inclusive Outdoor Experiences

POCO welcomes families and children on our outings, and hike leaders play a critical role in making children feel excited, safe, included, and connected to nature. This section provides additional helpful strategies and thoughtful practices for leading hikes that involve children, from toddlers to age 10.

Supporting Children Who Are Nervous About Hiking or Paddling

Greet each child warmly and with enthusiasm. A friendly smile and encouraging words go a long way. Let them know you see them.

Acknowledge their feelings. Say something like, "It's okay to feel unsure. Let's explore together and have fun!"

Give them a "job" (e.g., line leader, leaf collector, animal spotter) to give them a sense of purpose and focus.

Let them know it's okay to take their time and celebrate small accomplishments along the way. (Wow, you made it to the top!)

Let them know that they are seen and valued – not monitored.

Making Insects and Small Creatures Exciting (Not Scary)

Model curiosity and awe. React with delight when spotting insects or bugs: "Wow! Look at this beautiful beetle - have you ever seen one like that?"

Encourage exploration with tools like magnifying glasses or binoculars when possible.

Share fun facts about insects and explain their role in the ecosystem. Invite the children to share what they know, especially Guardians.

Guide children to mostly observe rather than touch, helping to build respect and appreciation, and keeping them safe from allergic reactions.

Encouraging Quiet Observation of Wildlife

Frame quiet moments as a special game: "Let's turn on our 'nature ears' and see what we can hear!"

Practice stillness by having a group "freeze" game. Who can stay quiet the longest and hear the most?

Let kids know that animals are shy and more likely to appear when we're calm and quiet.

Teaching the Importance of Staying on the Trail

Use simple language to explain why: "When we stay on the trail, we keep plants safe and avoid stepping on animal homes."

Use visuals like trail signs or markers to show what's protected.

Make it fun: "Let's pretend the trail is a magic path."

Empowering Kids as Leaders

Rotate leadership roles such as Trail Leader, Animal Watcher, Clue Finder.

Offer gentle guidance while encouraging independence: “You’re leading us so be sure that everyone can keep up with you – maybe we can skip together for 10 counts but not run”.

Celebrate their leadership with applause, stickers, or a group thank-you. Find and comment on what’s good about each hike leader.

Fun Games for Hikes or Paddles

"Nature Bingo": Make simple cards with common plants, bugs, and birds.

"Follow the Leader": Let a child lead with silly motions for the group to follow. (Walk this way – imitate the walker)

"What’s Missing?": Show a group of natural objects, hide one, and ask what’s missing.

"Story Chain": Each person adds a sentence to a group nature story as you walk.

For paddles: “Water Watchers” (spot floating leaves or fish), “Quiet Paddler Challenge” (move silently to see who can hear birds first), and “Paddle Pose” (freeze in silly poses on cue).

"Story Chain": Pick a topic/object/animal/sound/etc. and let everyone take a turn, starting with “One time...”

Teaching Leave No Trace to Children

Use simple phrases like “Leave what you find,” “Pack it in, pack it out,” and “Take only pictures.” There will be sticks that kids will want to take, or leaves, or special rocks, but they may not pick flowers.

Create a “Nature Hero” pledge together for kids to repeat when stopped for lunch.

Share stories about animals affected by pollution to inspire empathy.

What to Pack, if Possible, When Hiking with Children

Magnifying glass or binoculars

Extra snacks and water (kid-friendly)

Simple first aid kit (including fun bandages)

Wet wipes and hand sanitizer

Small trash bags for litter collection

Nature scavenger hunt cards

Bubbles or stickers for encouragement

Lightweight field guides or ID cards

Small pads and pencils for drawing or note-taking

Sunscreen and bug spray

Name tags or wristbands (especially for larger groups)

Tablecloth

Other Considerations

Be flexible and adjust pace or plans based on the children's energy and interest.

Build in some extra time for exploration, questions, and rest.

Celebrate curiosity! Every "Why?" is an opportunity to connect and teach, and a sign that things are going well. Questions are good!

Acknowledge the presence of parents and encourage them to engage with their children's exploration.

End with a circle time where children can share what they saw, felt, or learned, or share their favorite thing experienced.

Thank You, Hike Leader. You Are a Treasure to POCO and a Light to Our Community.

With care and creativity, POCO hike leaders have the power to turn a simple 60-minute walk into something unforgettable - a moment of wonder, connection, and discovery that children carry with them long after the trail ends. The way you lead can spark a lifelong love for nature, a sense of belonging in the outdoors, and a joy in exploring the world around them.

Your walk might be the beginning of a family's new tradition. They might decide to spend more time together, and more time outside. They might deepen the new friendships that they made on a walk you led. These small, meaningful experiences can ripple outward, shaping healthier habits, deeper bonds, and stronger communities.

In other words, you're not just guiding a group along a path. You're opening doors, lighting sparks, and creating magic. Thank you for showing up with heart, for leading with intention, and for making every step matter. Your impact is real, and it's appreciated.

MY NOTES

