

## SUGGESTIONS ON FORMING A NEW YOUTH GROUP IN YOUR CLUB

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If your local society or club doesn't already have a youth group in place, here are five general "rules" I've learned as a result of talking with folks who have taken the initiative to begin one:

**Capitalize on your existing pool of talent.** It's hard to find someone who knows everything about every facet of rockhounding, but in most clubs you find an amazingly diverse storehouse of individual knowledge. One person has an intense love of fossils, another is an expert cab crafter, another has an amazing mineral collection. Start by identifying adults within the ranks of your club's members and their individual strengths. Then gather commitments! Just one member a month committing to help with a presentation or activity will carry you through your first year. Make it clear that this needs to be a club commitment, not the project of any single individual.

**Plan before you start.** How will your activities be organized? You should have procedures spelled out, and they should be more-or-less consistent from meeting-to-meeting so expectations are clear for everyone involved and to create a familiar sense of rhythm for the kids. You might choose to devote 10 to 20 minutes of your usual club meeting to a Pebble Pup Presentation; or you might choose a monthly activity or workshop at a member's home just for the kids. Whatever you choose, keep the structure and expectations more-or-less consistent. In addition to planning the structure of a typical meeting, ideally, you should plan your entire first year's calendar in advance, gathering commitments from club members to take on specific months. Then, publicize the schedule in your club bulletin and elsewhere so everyone knows what's coming and appropriate preparations can be made well in advance rather than moving from meeting to meeting in a last-minute rush to find a new topic, activity, or speaker.

**Center meetings around an activity.** Most adult meetings are centered around a lecture or presentation, and during these, you'll observe kids a) sleeping or b) running the hallways. The best way

to channel kids' curiosity and energy is through hands-on activities. There should be a brief presentation to set the stage, but the bulk of your meeting should be activity-oriented. For instance, in introducing fossils, you very briefly should give kids the utmost basics on what a fossil is and on the fossilization process and then move quickly to sturdy specimens kids can see and touch and pass around, perhaps with a couple large-format picture books and dinosaur models as illustrations. Then move on to the main event: an activity making clay and plaster casts so kids can walk away with their very own plaster fossil at the end of the night. Get kids learning by doing, and they'll want to come back for more.

**Reward kids with something tangible after each meeting.** Kids like to collect, so one goal should be to help them build a basic collection. In addition to whatever they may end up with from the activity session of each meeting (like the fossil cast described above), you might also open or close each meeting with a raffle where every kid is a winner. Spread out a selection of rocks, minerals, and fossils, and give each child a single raffle ticket and let them pick from the selection when their numbers are called. Or give each child the same sort of specimen. (Encourage adult members, when going on field trips, to stockpile and bring home a supply of whatever they're seeking—whether quartz crystals, fossil shark teeth, agates, or barite roses—for the kids.) Yet another idea is to hand out gold stars or stickers, such as the rolls of small "Rockhound" stickers available from [Frank Mullaney](#) of the California Federation (phone, 408-266-1791; email, rockyfivaol.com) at the conclusion of any activity or club meeting, and once kids have earned 3 or 4 stars or stickers, they can trade them in for a mineral or fossil. Whatever route you choose to go, label specimens with info on what they are and where they came from to begin teaching kids the basics of documenting their collections to add both personal and scientific value. Finally, you can also use the American Federation of Mineralogical Society's Future Rockhounds of America Badge program to work with kids toward earning badges in the various areas of our hobby (rocks and minerals, fossils, lapidary, gold panning and prospecting, showmanship, etc.).

***Involve parents.*** A youth program should not turn into a babysitting service. Kids have a lot of energy (my own energy was constantly getting me into trouble when I was in elementary school, as my second-grade “D” in conduct will attest...), and parents should be expected to help channel that energy in positive, productive directions and to lend their support. The larger the youth group, the more important it is that a number of adults are on hand to provide individual attention and to prevent the inevitable tendency toward chaos. This also brings up a point I wish we didn’t have to go into, but it’s important to raise, namely, the importance of having youth leaders who are well known by all in the club and of having multiple adults on hand when working with kids. We need to ensure a safe, secure, and wholesome environment. The safety of our youth is of primary importance. Finally, getting parents involved in running your activities will help in cultivating future youth leaders for your club, thus avoiding the common problem of burn-out if a single individual is asked to run the youth program year after year.

A terrific source filled with other ideas is *Working With Young People*, by Mabel Kingdon Gross. This manual was prepared for and published by the Eastern Federation of Mineralogical and Lapidary Societies. It’s an excellent guide to starting up a juniors’ program from scratch, as well as a resource of activity tips.

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