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EcoConsumer

How to get groups to go green

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By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

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For example, a social or professional group that meets monthly may have no systems in place whatsoever to recycle or conserve resources. Our children's sports teams, supervised by volunteer parents, may produce prodigious amounts of trash. But it doesn't have to be that way.

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Q: Why is it so challenging to green up our groups and clubs?

A: Groups often hold meetings or activities at various locations, which makes it hard to set up recycling programs. Teams, clubs and groups generally rely on volunteers who already have their hands full and don't need something else to do. Groups also may include people who live far from each other, which increases transportation impacts.

Q: So where do we begin?

A: Groups and food go together, so any green strategy should address waste from food and its packaging. If you're meeting in someone's home, handle food waste the same way you would for a big party. Food scraps and food-soiled paper should all go in the yard-waste cart. Distribute leftovers based on what people like, to make sure they get eaten.

Many groups hold outdoor gatherings this time of year, and for those you might need a volunteer to take the recyclables and food scraps and put them in their home-collection bins. Biodegradable utensils may make sense for certain events in the future, but forgo them for now because most residential food-waste-collection programs do not currently accept those. Use durable dishes and utensils when possible.

Q: What about all the packaging waste from the snacks for our kids' sports teams?

A: These days, parents often provide a deluge of snacks for their children's teams for every game and even every practice. That may be overdoing it, both for health and environmental reasons. When you do bring treats, avoid single-serving junk-food snacks in throwaway packaging. A Woodinville mom says the homemade Rice Krispie treats and orange slices she provides for her

son's teams have been well-received.

Q: How do you handle the flood of waste from all the water and drinks that sports teams consume?

A: Don't just buy single-serving bottled water by the case and hand it out. Promote or provide reusable water bottles, but you may need to help make sure they get washed out regularly and don't get lost, especially for smaller children.

One beverage company aggressively markets a sports-drink brand with a separate formulation for before, during and after athletic activities. The "before" drink comes in a plastic pouch that is not easily recyclable. If you think your kids really need a sports drink other than water, consider the powder or tablets you mix with water, which are usually much less expensive and less wasteful.

Q: I feel like all the driving we do to events and games really takes a toll on the planet, and my wallet. How can we put the brakes on that?

A: Although the increasing number of "select" sports teams for youths means that parents often live long distances from each other, carpooling can still save money, time and resources. Do an online search for "carpool spreadsheet" to find examples of electronic systems to organize your carpool and map your stops. If your children live within a couple miles of their group or team activities, encourage them to ride bikes or walk there in groups.

Q: Any other tips?

A: Look for greener and less-toxic products when buying shirts, water bottles, bags and other promotional items for your groups, and make sure you choose items that will actually get used.

When you add the green dimension to your groups or teams, it enhances the experience and lets you practice the same values you live by at home. It's almost like adding a new member to the group.

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