

Youth Programs at Sugarbush Soaring
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Kids Flying Gliders (Real Ones)

Flying is so much more than just getting into a crowded airliner and sitting cramped for several hours. For one, there are few things more satisfying and thrilling than soaring in a glider above our beautiful Mad River Valley. Problem is, it is not cheap. This makes it especially difficult for young people to pursue gliding, or any form of aviation. At Sugarbush Soaring at the Warren-Sugarbush Airport in Warren, we have four different programs to interest youth in what we call “real flying” and to help them with the costs of doing this.

The Line Crew Program gives the participating youngsters a free flight with an instructor for each day they “work” the flight line at the airport. Kids as young as thirteen and with a good academic record can enter the program. What we require is a commitment and a serious attitude, as flying is after all a serious activity. The participants are encouraged to be at the airport, weather permitting, as many days as they easily can during our season. Their duties, always under the supervision of a flight instructor, include cleaning the gliders at the beginning of the day, moving them to the take-off flight line, helping launch the gliders, retrieving them after landing, and helping tie down or hangar them at the end of the flying day. The Crew “earn” for themselves between 80 and 90 flights each season. Many of the Line Crew stay with the program for three or more years. Quite a few have continued with aviation careers. Kenda Blair of Warren, a mid-ninety's member, went on to the U. S. Air Force Academy. She is now a major in the Air Force, instructing in the large military C-130 transports, following two tours of duty in the Mid East. Former Fayston resident Cody Long is now employed as an aircraft (A & P) mechanic in Nashua, NH. Rose Piscitelli just graduated this past June with a major in airport management. Others have achieved similar careers.

Line Crew members this year include Luke Hammer, 17, of Montpelier, now in his fourth year, Keegan McKenna, 15, of Warren in his third year, Ian Clarke, 15, from Killington, third year, Payton Veilleux, 17, from Pittsfield, fourth year, Parker Herlihy, 16, fourth year, and Alex Scaperotta, 14, starting this summer, both of Fayston. Luke passed his flight test for his private glide certificate on August 26 of this year. Keegan soloed on July 18. Ian had already soloed last summer. This program is financed by Flight Experience for Youth (also known as “FEFY”), a 501c3-registered organization created specifically to help finance these youth programs at Sugarbush Soaring. Contributions may be made to FEFY at the airport or to PO Box 123 in Warren, VT 05674. Drop by the airport some time, and watch these youngsters in action.

For students who are unable to devote the time that the Line Crew requires, there is the Student Program. This is season-long for full-time qualified students normally in the 18 to 24 years of age. These participants are required to work at the airport under the direction of a flight instructor one day each month during the soaring season at duties the same as for the Line Crew. In return, they have the same privileges as full Sugarbush Soaring Club members at considerably reduced dues and with no requirement to own a Club share.

A very popular program for youngsters who don't necessarily live in this area offers a full concentrated week of flying and related activities. A group of from five to eight youngsters 14 to 18 years old receive some intensive “ground-school” training (aviation book-learning – weather and aerodynamics for pilots, FAA rules) plus ten training flights each during the week. They camp out on the field with their flight instructor and counselors, with all their meals at the airport's restaurant Sugar

Mama's. This adventure camp is run usually once or twice a year. It has a waiting list of over a year, which attests to its popularity. Repeat campers usually solo in the second or third year. A few local youngsters have been sponsored to this camp by Flight Experience for Youth, covering all of their expenses.

For the next age group, 20 through 29, Sugarbush Soaring offers a reduced-rate program similar to what the ski area offers, called the Twenties Program. This is an economical entry method into Club membership for this age group. Club shares may be purchased on a time basis, paying just ten percent of the share price annually. Full-member privileges and share ownership are conveyed at the first annual payment. Annual dues run about one-third that of regular full members.

Those of us who have enjoyed the beauty of soaring for many years feel an obligation and a desire to extend to the next generation the pleasures we have had in the air. Sugarbush Soaring has long had a strong tradition of training new pilots. These youth programs have been created to further this aim. Young people quickly learn the skills required to fly. Along with acquiring the mechanical techniques of flying, come the more important lessons of mental discipline, self-confidence, and mature decision-making that will stay with the young pilots forever, even if they do not choose aviation as a career. In this age of so many passive spectator sports like computer simulations and "Reality" TV, actually learning to soar, to fly high above the mountains of Vermont, as a solo student as young as fourteen, can be a life-changing experience for anyone. And it usually is.