

## Summer Camps and Programs

Many faith-based organizations hold day or overnight camps for children, particularly in the summer months. These camps typically offer outdoor learning opportunities, adventures, swimming and boating activities as well as faith sharing opportunities. As with any outdoor group activities, there are risk exposures.

### Planning and Preparing for Camp

An important risk management strategy for camp programs is proper planning and preparation. The key to a safe and incident free camp is that there should be no surprises. While some organizations own the property where the camps are held, many have to contract with a campground for the use of their facilities and personnel. Before choosing a location, an on-site visit is advisable.

It is recommended to choose a camp that is accredited by the American Camp Association. The standards that are part of an accreditation process generally lay the framework for a safe organization.

Issues to consider as part of the planning process include:

- Planned activities
- Staffing levels, ratios and maximum number of attendees
- Operational policies and procedures
- Abuse prevention
- Emergency preparedness and management
- Education/training

### Camp Structure and Activities

Day camps pose less risk for the organization than overnight camps since the hours are limited and observation and supervision of the campers tends to be more focused. Camps that include parental involvement/supervision are also less risky since the parent retains responsibility for the minor.

Establish the format for the camp, daily itinerary and list of activities well in advance of the camp session. It is important that senior management review the planned activities, evaluating them for both content and safety.

For overnight camping, evaluate cabins for safety and comfort level. Ensure that all buildings used for sleeping quarters are equipped with smoke detectors and fire extinguishers.

## Staffing Levels and Ratios

In most cases, the staff or volunteer ratio to campers tends to be 1:12 (or even better in some instances). It is important that staff levels are established based on the anticipated number of campers and their ages. Higher staffing levels allow closer supervision of the campers and more one on one interaction. It is important that camps have a nurse or other licensed healthcare provider on site to handle emergencies and to oversee medication administration.

## Operational Policies and Procedures

Some issues to consider include:

- Documentation of camper-specific information including contact information, health/medication history and consent
- General camp safety procedures
- Staffing levels
- Security procedures, including what to do in the event of a missing camper
- Management of medical or emergency incidents
- Completion of incident reports
- Utilization of contracted services such as food services, facilities, lifeguards, etc.
- Communication procedures
- Transportation policies, if applicable

## Hiring Practices and Background Checks/Abuse Prevention

It is important that thorough reference and criminal background checks be performed on all counselors, employees and volunteers who will be working at the camp. If camp employees (such as dietary staff, cleaning/facilities staff, lifeguards, etc.) will be interacting with campers/campers' families, verify that background checks are required by their employer. Background checks should include the National Sex Offender database and applicable state sexual abuse registries.

When hiring staff, require at least three references. Child abuse prevention experts recommend including a family member in the reference pool. A family member might be willing to communicate if they have any concerns or qualms about whether the potential staff member should be working with children.

Develop a clear organizational policy that abuse of any type will not be tolerated. Camp environments often provide opportunities for staff to be alone with children, so establish policies to help prevent this situation from occurring. Double coverage or "two deep" policies will also help to protect staff and volunteers from false allegations of abuse.

## Emergency Preparedness and Management

Verify that procedures are in place for management of emergency situations. Train staff on steps to take in the event of a medical or other emergency, such as severe weather conditions. Identify severe weather shelter locations. Policies and procedures for the office setting will not apply in an outdoors and uncontrolled environment so it is important that prior to the camp, staff and volunteers review pertinent procedures for the camp setting. It might be beneficial to have at least one satellite phone available since cell phone use is not always reliable in emergency situations.

Many campgrounds have significant water hazards such as swimming pools, rivers or lakes. If water activities are included as part of the planned program, be sure to address additional safety issues specific to that risk.

## Education/Training

Prior to the start of each camp, train staff to refresh their knowledge of camp procedures, documentation requirements and safety issues. This is in addition to any other organizational orientation and training requirements. Issues to address, at a minimum, include:

- Basic first aid
- Health and sanitation/infection control
- Food safety (if staff will be involved in food preparation)
- Hydration guidelines, particularly in the summer months
- Emergency procedures
- Planned activities and safety issues
- Staffing ratios/camper monitoring and supervision
- Abuse prevention

## Summary: Creating a Culture of Safety

Creating a culture of safety depends on evaluating the “what if” scenarios that might compromise the safety of a child or adult at camp. A proactive risk analysis approach during the planning and preparation phase helps identify potential safety concerns and plan steps to minimize risk. Assigning one or two staff members as a safety team may help emphasize the priority of safety among all staff. Involving front line staff in the evaluation of safety may heighten the objectivity of the analysis and help identify issues that management has not considered. Safety is everyone’s priority and everyone’s responsibility.

## Additional Resources

The American Camp Association | [www.acacamps.org](http://www.acacamps.org)

Praesidium, Inc. | [www.praesidiuminc.com](http://www.praesidiuminc.com)

The National Sex Offender Public Website | [www.nsopw.gov](http://www.nsopw.gov)

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