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Help protect campers from sexual abuse

Unfortunately, camp is an attractive place to sexual predators — it provides access to children, employees are often seasonal, overnight stays are common and there is no parental supervision. The sad reality is that even if you have protocols to weed out and stop predators, you should probably be doing more.

“Don’t wait until something horrific happens,” said Kimberlee Norris, an attorney who specializes in sexual abuse litigation and who is the co-founder, along with her law partner and husband Gregory Love, of MinistrySafe and Abuse Prevention Systems. “There is no issue with higher sensitivity among parents and the public than child sexual abuse. A number of states have mandated sexual abuse training at youth camps, and I believe every state will do so within the next 10-15 years.”

“Don’t make assumptions about the safety of your camp,” said Dennis Queen, who has a 30-year history as an administrator of Christian schools and has also worked with camps. “Protecting children isn’t a box you check off; it requires daily vigilance.”

Many times, molesters have multiple victims, and few of them are caught. “We’re running youth programs in the midst of the threat — not eliminating it,” said Rick Braschler, the director of risk management at Kanakuk Kamp, senior risk consultant for Camp Risk Solutions and the author and developer of its child protection plan.

Prevention and detection

The following can help improve the likelihood of abuse prevention and detection.

Effective screening processes. “Each hiring step — your application, hiring criteria and the interview — must be designed to reveal high-risk responses,” Norris said. “You must know what to ask and how to interpret the applicant’s answers.”

Abusers look for organizations with lax policies,” Braschler said. “Your application or interview process must encourage abusers to opt out of working for you or enable you to screen them out.”

Don’t limit screening to new hires. “Conduct supplemental screening each year, including an annual criminal background check,” Norris said.

Training. Provide all staff with a thorough grounding in the grooming process — the steps an abuser uses to select, isolate and prepare a specific child for abuse. “Encourage staff to report something that doesn’t feel right — even if it’s nothing overt,” Norris said. “If abusers

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Risk Reporter talks with Mark Bruskotter, owner of Paddle King, a raft manufacturer in Carson City, Mich.

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make it past your screening process but you've trained your staff well, you have a better chance of identifying them."

Know that abusers don't just groom campers — they also groom "gatekeepers." "Abusers are typically well liked and respected by camp leadership, and that's intentional — it makes it harder to report them," Norris said.

Parents are one of the most important gatekeepers. "Share information about sexual abuse with parents ahead of camp and ask them to speak with their children," Braschler said.

Train campers too. "Don't talk about 'sexual abuse' — use terms children understand," Braschler stressed. He recommended a process called 3-6-0:

- **3 rules:** Recognize, resist and report anyone who goes outside established behavioral boundaries.
- **6 boundaries:** Modesty, no one-on-one interaction in private, okay touching versus bad touching, okay talking versus bad talking, bullying and protecting your space.
- **0 tolerance:** If a camper feels uncomfortable for any reason, report it. "We offer three ways to report," Braschler said. "A verbal report to a safe adult, a note in a secure box that's checked daily or a call to the national child abuse hotline at 1-800-4-A-Child."

Educate staff on indicators that a child is a victim. These include sexual indicators — promiscuity, advanced sexual knowledge, sexually explicit drawings — or things like trouble sleeping, having a hard time concentrating, withdrawal or fear of being alone.

Meaningful policies and procedures. "We often find management has one vision and 'boots in the sand' staff members have a different one," Norris said.

Policies and procedures must come together with training. "Every camp staff has rule followers and non-rule followers," Norris said. "The rules must make sense, or they become negotiable to the non-rule followers. Be clear that no one is above the rules and policies and act accordingly."

Keep policies short and sweet. "Each staff member should receive only information that applies to them," Norris said. Conduct periodic policy reviews and revisit those not being followed.

Create a culture of communication and a clear chain of reporting. "Have three people for staff to report concerns to, who are required to share every report with management," Norris said. "This avoids bottlenecks and danger of bias."

Establishing "bright line boundaries" — behaviors that are never accepted under any circumstances — is critical. For example, Norris recommended wrestling never be allowed at camp. Another common boundary is no one-on-one contact with a camper.

Other boundaries — such as humor and suggestive talk — can be more challenging, especially with college-age staff.

"Molesters can use unsuitable language and humor to draw kids in," Queen said. "Don't tolerate this behavior."

Better criminal background checks. "The level of interaction a person will have with children should drive the type of check," Norris said.

Norris recommended doing a county-level check on key applicants because that's where most sexual abuse crimes are prosecuted. A national-level check should also be conducted.

Church Mutual customers can receive discounted pricing on these screening services through First Advantage. Visit www.churchmutual.com/screen for more information.

Other factors to consider: camp design and supervision

The average camp is inherently difficult to police, but design changes can help — windows in doors or walls, shower wall height that shows how many people are in a stall, eliminating foliage to prevent hiding areas near buildings. Hold all activities in an area with a clear line of site.

Conduct regular clean sweeps of all private areas with multiple staff members and do camp walk-throughs. "After lights out, have periodic sweeps to disrupt opportunities for isolation that could lead to abuse," Braschler said. "Use random protector supervision — during active programming, when only certain areas are used, randomly check all unused zones to disrupt the isolation process and ensure an abuser hasn't taken a child there."

What should happen after a report

In most states, camp staff are considered mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect. Be familiar with statutory reporting requirements in your state, enlist legal assistance and create an appropriate reporting plan. For more information about reporting requirements, visit <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/5119>.

"Christian-based camps can get in trouble if they try to handle a legal matter in a spiritual way," Queen said.

"Many civil cases are filed due to post-allegation actions, remarks or communication from camp managers or administrators. If families feel their child is the camp's priority after an allegation is made, litigation is far less likely. Get legal counsel familiar with these issues before you need the advice," Norris advises.

Resources:

- Church Mutual offers customers a safety video, *Abuse At Camp*, to help train your staff how to detect, prevent and report abuse at camp: www.churchmutual.com/campsafety.
- MinistrySafe provides online awareness training, screening training and sample camp policies at www.ministrysafe.com.
- www.kanakukchildprotection.org was developed in response to first-hand abuse experience and based on sound guidance from abuse industry experts.





Managing Your Risks

Giving others a ride

All-terrain vehicles (ATVs), pickup trucks, golf carts and Gators™ are great for helping staff efficiently take care of camp business. It can be tempting for campers or other staff members to try to save time — and a few steps — by catching “free rides” on these vehicles.

A counselor might tag along by sitting on the fender of a vehicle, or a couple of campers could snag a lift on a counselor’s golf cart.

It seems harmless, but these extra riders increase the chances of an accident — and the chances of someone getting hurt. Injuries typically happen when extra riders fall off a vehicle in motion or take a tumble during a sudden stop and are run over or otherwise injured.

Now is a good time to review your policies for using motorized vehicles on camp property. Your policy should include the following safety rules to help prevent serious injuries:

- All motorized vehicles must be thoroughly inspected before the start of the season, and required repairs must be made before use.
- Only authorized camp staff may operate and ride in camp vehicles.
- All camp staff must be trained in the safe operation of camp vehicles before use.
- Drivers should not give “free rides” to others.
- Keys must be kept in a secure place when vehicles are not in use, and a log of key holders should be maintained to help prevent unauthorized use of vehicles.
- All drivers must observe speed limits and stay within the bounds of where vehicles are permitted to be driven.
- Drivers and riders must wear appropriate personal protective equipment (including proper footwear, helmets and eye protection) when operating an ATV.

Review your policy with current staff and new employees during orientation. If you observe any unsafe practices, be sure to follow up with the staff and/or campers involved to remind them of the safety policies and why they are in place.

Edward A. Steele
Risk Control Manager



Seasonal Spotlight

Schedule a spring tune up for your electrical systems

Mother Nature, rodents and general wear and tear can all cause damage to your electrical systems. The American Camp Association states that most fires at camp are linked to an electrical issue, so it’s critical to regularly inspect and maintain your systems.

Establish safety protocols. Any staff that inspects or repairs electrical systems should have experience with electrical systems and thorough training in safety procedures and the proper use of personal protective equipment. “You may not always need a certified electrician, but you should work with one if an energized panel is involved,” said Dave Helgeson, a master electrician with 30 years of electrical experience and owner of Helgeson Electric Inc. in Baldwin, Wis.

Inspect all electrical systems at least annually. Create an inspection checklist that includes both interior and exterior areas. Outside, look for wiring that has been damaged or knocked down over the winter. Make sure wires are attached to electrical poles only — not trees. “All outside 120-volt receptacles — and any receptacles near water — should have a ground-fault circuit interrupter,” Helgeson said. “Test each unit and replace any that don’t reset. Outside plugs should have weatherproof covers — check for damage to covers after winter.”

Inside, look for indications that weather or rodents have caused damage — do this before you turn the power back on as damaged wires can be a fire hazard. Water and animal droppings are obvious signs that further investigation is needed. Test all smoke and carbon monoxide detectors at this time too.

Exercise your generator. “Power it up and transfer the electrical load onto the generator to ensure it’s working properly,” Helgeson said. “Follow the manufacturer’s recommendations for maintenance.”

Install and inspect surge protection. Computers have become a critical tool at even the most rustic camps. Install a transient voltage surge suppressor (TVSS) or surge protective device (SPD) on your breaker panel to protect critical systems from energy surges. “Choose one that’s Underwriters Laboratories-listed and marked with the manufacturer’s name, catalog number, electrical rating, short circuit current rating and SVR (support vector regression, which has to do with electrical load) and date of manufacture,” Helgeson said. “It should also be marked TVSS or SPD and will cost at least \$200 — a price worth paying to prevent damage that could be much more costly.”

Check extension cords and electrical appliances. Include these items in your annual inspection. Look for damaged wires and make sure all features are working properly.

Still have fuses? Consider an update. If your camp hasn’t made the transition to circuit breakers, it’s time to investigate. Circuit breakers minimize fire risk if a fuse overloads because they turn off the flow of electricity. Plus they only require a flip of a switch to turn back on. Circuit breakers mean you don’t need to keep fuses on hand and eliminate problems with using the wrong replacement fuse — too much power can be a fire risk, and too little can cause permanent damage.

Q | A

A Perspective

Swimming rafts are a tradition of summer camp and can be a fun addition to your lakefront activities. But like anything that involves water, safety must be your top priority. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that there are about 10 unintentional drowning deaths per day in the U.S. For those 15 years and older, over half of all drownings occurred in a natural water setting — a lake, river or ocean. To learn more about raft safety, Risk Reporter spoke with Mark Bruskotter, owner of Paddle King, a raft manufacturer in Carson City, Mich.



Risk Reporter: Water depth, raft location and safe anchoring are critical. What are the key steps to take?

Mark Bruskotter: Install the raft in at least 8 feet of water — maybe deeper if your raft sits high out of the water — while still keeping it as close to shore as possible. This will make it easier for a lifeguard to get to the raft, if necessary, and also reduces problems with campers swimming beyond their ability when it comes to distance.

Anchor the raft using either a cement base or an auger that's completely submerged into the bottom of the lake or pond. Connect the anchor to a chain that attaches to a "snubber," which is a 2-foot-long piece of rubber. The snubber is a shock absorber — when kids jump off, it prevents a hard pull on the raft. Attach the snubber to four ropes that connect to four points on the raft for stability. The ropes should be at least ½ inch in diameter and should not have any loose lengths that swimmers could get tangled in. Don't use chains between the snubber and the raft — they don't have enough "give" and will cause the raft to jerk too much.

Risk Reporter: What about the height of the raft above the water?

Mark Bruskotter: The lower your raft is to the water, the safer and more stable it will be. There's less impact when kids jump off the raft and a lower center of gravity. Our rafts sit about 12 inches out of the water.

Risk Reporter: How many people should be on a raft at a time?

Mark Bruskotter: Check the manufacturer's recommendations — limits are typically weight-based, not by number of people. That said, tell campers to spread out on the raft, not to sit on one corner. It takes a lot to flip a raft, especially if it's anchored correctly, but that doesn't mean kids won't try!

Risk Reporter: What are other safety recommendations?

Mark Bruskotter: Don't allow anyone to swim under the raft — they risk getting tangled in the anchor ropes. Don't let kids push or shove when they're on the raft or climb up on each other to dive off. Sufficient lifeguards should be present at all times, and no one should use the raft unless they've met your swim safety requirements. Use a ladder that's bolted to the raft, so it doesn't come off or get lost. Check the ladder every day or before every swim session to make sure it's secure. Most rafts are finished with clean edges and shouldn't present any danger to swimmers, but it's a good idea to inspect them regularly. Don't allow swimming in the dark and add reflectors to your raft, so boaters can see it at night.