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Loose protocols lose campers

"A camper is missing."

Few words strike more fear in the hearts of camp directors and staff members than those. Effective protocols — both to avoid a lost camper and find the camper quickly — are critical to camper safety and your camp's reputation.

Take preventive measures

Address areas of vulnerability. "Look for areas where it would be easy for a child to walk off or someone with bad intentions to take a child," said Tom Madeyski, executive director for the YMCA of San Diego County. "Have an outside expert do an audit and address their findings."

Don't let campers travel alone. "We've gone to truddies (three people) instead of buddies (two people)," Madeyski said.

In addition, instruct campers to speak with a counselor before leaving a group.

Campers also "should alert a leader if they notice someone's missing," said Donna A. Lopiano, Ph.D., president of Sports Management Resources, a sports program consultancy, and co-author of the "Athletic Director's Desk Reference."

Monitor. Teach leaders to constantly scan and do head counts of their group. "Transitions between activities are one of the trickiest times," Madeyski said. "Handoffs should always be at a central location. Each leader should have a sign for their group, do a check-in and determine where any stragglers are before going to the next activity."

Minimize periods of idleness — these are times when children are more likely to wander away.

Have clear policies for public activities. "Many camps spend a day in a public place," Madeyski said. "Identify campers with a wristband or T-shirt, have a clear set of procedures for public places regarding behavior and what to do if you're lost, and review them ahead of time."

Take steps to improve safety on the trail. Send two leaders on every hike. "One should lead and one should be in the sweep, or rear, position," Madeyski said.

Before a hike begins, sit down with the group and discuss the day's activities. "Review the route — what you'll pass, elevation changes and anticipated hazards and risks," said Drew Leemon, director of risk management at the National Outdoor Leadership School, or NOLS, in Wyoming. "Everyone in the group should have a basic feel for the route."

When setting up camp, create boundaries that campers shouldn't go beyond and encourage campers to be aware of their surroundings. "Situational awareness is critical," Leemon said. "Campers should always be thinking: 'Where is the sun?' 'Where is the river we've been following?' 'How far am I from the last tent?'"

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Risk Reporter talks with Greg Cronin, a camp consultant and staff trainer with more than 30 years of camp experience



(Protocols)

One of the biggest problem areas for campers on the trail is wandering away to go to the bathroom. "Campers go off in the morning and don't tell anyone," Leemon said. "They think they're not going that far, but they get disoriented and can't find their way back."

Prepare campers ahead of time. From the first day at camp, instruct campers on steps to take if they think they're lost. "The general wisdom is 'Stay where you are, and we will find you,'" Madeyski said.

Role-play. "Work with the kids on scenarios — get them involved in actively discussing solutions," Leemon said. "Don't just tell them what to do if they're lost."

Even on a day hike, each camper should carry the "10 essentials." This list of essentials was originally created in the 1930s by The Mountaineers, an organization for climbers and outdoor adventures, according to REI. The recently updated list includes a map and compass; sun protection; insulation (Leemon recommends a large plastic garbage bag that can be worn poncho style); headlamp/flashlight; first-aid supplies; tools, including a pocket knife, and a repair kit for patching inflatable items; food and water.

Leemon also recommends every camper carry string, duct tape, a pencil and paper for making notes, a mirror for signaling and a whistle — the sound carries much better than yelling. Teach campers to stay positive and calm, so they don't make mistakes, he said.

If campers will be out on a trail, NOLS teaches them to do the following if lost:

- Find a comfortable place to spend the night — long before dark. Spots under evergreen trees and overhangs, higher on hills and out of the wind work best.
- Be obvious to searchers. Light a smoky fire, stay in open areas, mark an area with bright clothing and stay on or close to trails.
- Look for water.
- Keep warm. Leaves and pine boughs can create pockets of warmth.

A camper is lost: What should happen next?

Next steps will often depend on the following:

- Location — in the campground or on the trail
- Point where last seen
- Age and experience of the camper and group leaders (on trail)
- Physical or emotional considerations
- If the camper is alone
- Weather conditions
- Time of day
- Presence of wild animals

"Obviously, the younger and less experienced the camper is, combined with whether they're alone, where they were lost and conditions like waning daylight and being in bear country, would all drive a faster and more urgent response," Leemon said.

Madeyski recommended a three-tier approach to an in-camp search:

Tier 1: A camper is reported missing. All activities continue while an immediate staff member alerts the director and radios all staff members to determine if the camper is simply in another place. Campers in the missing child's immediate group are asked where and when they last saw the camper. "About 99 percent of the time, the camper is found at this stage," Madeyski said.

If there is any evidence of a person on campgrounds who doesn't fit into the environment, report this immediately.

Tier 2: If the camper isn't found in the first step, search his or her cabin and all other cabins and living areas; staff uses vehicles to travel all roads leading out of camp. "Provide information about the camper to all searchers: hair color, age, size, weight, description of (his or her) clothing and how long since the camper was seen," Lopiano said.

Tier 3: If the camper still hasn't been found, ring the camp bell to signal an emergency. All activities cease and all campers and staff members report to a central area. Each cabin takes roll, and staff members begin to quiz campers in other cabins. "The entire camp population will be in one area, and this frees your staff to begin a coordinated search," Madeyski said. "Implement your formal emergency procedures."

The American Camp Association missing person procedures states that a camper should be presumed lost and a public search instituted at the 20-minute mark of an internal extended search.

"When you call in outside help, simultaneously alert parents," Lopiano said.

"You don't want to alarm parents during the internal search process, but you'd rather over inform than under inform," Madeyski said. "You want parents to hear about the situation from you."

Expect the media to become aware of the situation at this point. "Have one spokesperson," Madeyski said. "Be careful to give out facts only, not opinions. Staff should know what is and isn't appropriate in terms of social media, and you should have clear consequences for any employee who's posting about this situation."

Learn from an incident. "It's critical to learn from an event and update your policies to reflect the experience," Lopiano said.

- **Resource:** For more in-depth recommendations on responding to a lost group or person in a trail setting, visit the NOLS website at www.nols.edu.



Managing Your Risks

Sweep hazards out of kitchens

Spring is a good time to conduct a thorough self-inspection of your commercial kitchen operations to ensure equipment and appliances are properly installed and in good working condition. Finding and correcting potential hazards ahead of time will help enhance the safety and security of your staff, campers and guests.

You should inspect all commercial cooking and kitchen equipment at least once a month. Your checklist should include the following actions:

- Remove grease buildup on appliances, walls and floors to reduce the chance of fire and the risk for slips and falls.
- Ensure cooking equipment is installed on a noncombustible floor surface with adequate clearances and away from combustible materials.
- Equip exhaust hoods with removable filters if frequent cooking takes place and install explosion-proof lights above the cooking equipment. Hoods, filters and exhaust ducts should be cleaned regularly to remove excess grease residue, a common cause of fires.
- Maintain fully charged automatic extinguishing systems within exhaust hoods and have them inspected twice a year by a qualified servicing contractor.
- Ensure electrical outlets near sinks are equipped with ground fault circuit interrupter-type —GFCI-type — receptacles to help reduce the potential for an electrical shock.
- Ensure flexible gas and electrical connections are properly hooked up to equipment and protected from damage.
- Provide appropriate fire extinguishers for cooking environments and make them readily available. Train staff on proper use of the extinguishers.

Church Mutual provides a Self-Inspection Safety Checklist for Camps and Conference Centers to help guide you through the process of inspecting your kitchen and other parts of your camp or conference center. To view and download a copy, visit www.churchmutual.com, click on "Safety Resources" and then "Camps and Conference Centers." Once there, scroll down and select the Self-Inspection Safety Checklist.

Edward A. Steele
Risk Control Manager



Seasonal Spotlight

Effective lifeguard training goes beyond certification

Roughly 10 people accidentally drown every day — and two of the victims are 14 or younger.¹ "You never get over a death at your camp," said Terri Lees, a vetted member of the Aquatic Subcouncil of the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council who helped create the United States Lifeguard Standards.

The following can help minimize the risk of a swimming-related tragedy.

Hire an experienced lifeguard manager. "Your lifeguards must be evaluated, hired, trained and managed by a skilled lifeguard who's a proficient trainer and supervisor," Lees said.

Create a lifeguarding plan. "Each camp venue is unique," Lees said. "Have a plan that's specific to yours and hire and train based on it."

Recognize and address the inherent challenges of beaches. "Beaches require a lot more underwater swimming, strength and endurance," Lees said. "You might have to run the length of the beach, swim out and surface dive — often multiple times — and be comfortable searching in murky water."

Require certification . . . but don't stop there. There are four typical certification programs for lifeguards: Red Cross, YMCA, Ellis & Associates and StarGuard. Camps tend to use the first two. "Your lifeguards should all be certified, certainly. This establishes they've gone through the training steps, but it simply means they were able to perform the required skills on test day," Lees said. "You need to test them too."

Try to assess prospects' mindsets in a crisis. "None of us know how we'd act in a crisis until it happens," Lees said. "Talk to prospects about emergency situations and how they dealt with it. You want someone whose reaction is to go toward danger — not away from it."

Conduct initial and ongoing training. "Ideally, I like to see three days of aquatic training before camp starts to ensure lifeguards have venue-specific skills — provide remediation if necessary — know the camp's emergency action plan and have exceptional CPR skills," Lees said.

Continue training throughout the season. "It takes an amazing amount of strength and energy to swim out, bring a drowning casualty in and perform CPR," Lees said. "Keep working with lifeguards to ensure they have the strength and skills they need. Focus on leg strength, core strength and endurance."

¹<http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>

- **Resources:** These two documents are invaluable: Lifeguard Standards, available at http://lifeguardstandards.org/index.php?pg=final_report, and the Model Aquatic Health Code, found at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/pools/mahc/>.

Q | A

A Perspective

Great programs and facilities are essential to a camp's success, but the best camps are those with exceptional employees — staff members who understand and share the camp's goals and make them come alive for campers.

As your camp prepares to head into the busy summer season, it is critical to prioritize good hiring and have an effective orientation plan in place. On-site



orientation typically spans five to seven days — or fewer — and includes everything from skills training to team building. Risk Reporter recently spoke with Greg Cronin, a camp consultant and staff trainer with more than 30 years of camp experience, about how to best prepare your staff members for the summer ahead.

Risk Reporter: How can camps improve their hiring?

Greg Cronin: Recognize how critical it is to your camp's success. Whoever is hiring must be able to articulate the mission of your camp and have a careful, predetermined interview process. Hire for character, skills and intelligence but focus on character. You can't teach that. Hire extra people. You'll always have dropouts and this helps avoid poor, last-minute hires.

Risk Reporter: You stressed using the months that fall between the actual hiring process and the day camp begins for orientation. Would you elaborate?

Cronin: By the time staff members arrive at your camp, they should have a clear idea of your camp's mission, what their role will be and what orientation will include. People buy into things they helped create. Connect staff members — both old and new — and start building a team before they arrive. Orientation isn't just about sharing information — it's about emotions, understanding your role and fitting in.

Risk Reporter: What should happen on the first day of orientation?

Cronin: Whoever hired staff members should be there to greet them, make people feel at ease and connected. Don't start off with the swimming test. People have body issues, and they're uncomfortable. Their first interaction with new co-workers shouldn't be in their swimsuit. Make introductory activities inclusive, not skill-based. Keep it neutral. Don't ask people to share personal information. There's no comfort zone yet.

Risk Reporter: What role should returning staff members play?

Cronin: They're a critical asset. Use them! Let them run activities, demonstrate skills and give tours. Encourage them to bond with new staff members.

Risk Reporter: What are some general tips for sharing information?

Cronin: Plan ahead. You have a lot of information to share in a short time, and you can't wing it. Stress the ABCs: audience before content. Get away from the classroom lecture model — be interactive. This is hard work and takes preparation. Many people aren't that experienced at this, but it's critical to put in the time and energy. Professional organizations can be good resources. Pay attention and be aware of information overload.

Risk Reporter: You mentioned that real training happens when campers arrive.

Cronin: It's all theoretical until then. Administrators must be extremely hands on during the first days to support and guide staff, especially new staff members. They're uncertain and uncomfortable, and administrators must help them. Let staff know it's OK to fail, so they're not afraid to try something new.