

Guidelines for Camp Counselors

Summer camp is an experience that millions of our children enjoy every year. It is also a time in which caretaking responsibilities may be transferred from the child's family to others such as camp counselors. In meeting your caretaking responsibilities you may encounter obstacles because the children placed in your care come from an unknown background, have had experiences you may not know about, and may bring problems that you do not have the experience or training to properly address. In spite of these disadvantages, you are in a position to be a source of strength and help to children placed in your care.

Reporting Child Abuse and Sexual Exploitation

Child abuse is a subject that we all hear and read about frequently. It is a term that encompasses mental, physical, and sexual victimization of children. Most camp counselors are not trained to make judgments about whether a child has been a victim of any kind of child abuse. It is important to know that in every state there are agencies that are required to examine reports of suspected abuse and use their expertise in handling the cases.

If you suspect that a child assigned to you is a victim of child abuse, you should report this to your camp director or nurse. They will discuss your suspicions with you and possibly talk to the child. In all states, persons with knowledge of suspected child abuse are required to report the case to a child-protective-services agency. In some states, failure to report carries criminal penalties—especially for child-care professionals such as teachers or nurses. In fact the laws

in your state may require you to report suspected child abuse to an appropriate child-protection agency **even if you have already reported it to the camp director or nurse**. Your camp director will be able to explain these responsibilities during staff orientation.

Detecting Sexual Exploitation

Some forms of abuse may not leave obvious physical evidence. There are, however, behavioral signs that may indicate victimization. This is especially true of children who have been sexually molested. You should be alert to the signs of sexual abuse including

- behavioral changes, extreme mood swings, withdrawal, fearfulness, and excessive crying.
- nightmares, fear of going to bed, or other sleep disturbances such as bed-wetting.
- inappropriate sexual activity, an unusual interest in sexual matters, or a knowledge of sexual matters beyond the child's years.
- a sudden "acting out" of feelings or aggressive or rebellious behavior.
- regression to infantile behavior.
- a fear of certain places, people, or activities—especially being alone with certain people. Children should not be forced to give affection to an adult or teenager if they do not want to do so. Be alert to signs that your child is trying to avoid someone, and listen carefully when your child tells you how he or she feels about someone.
- pain, itching, bleeding, fluid, or rawness in the private areas.

You should note that some of these behaviors may have other explanations. A child who comes to summer camp is entering a strange environment and may experience homesickness or anxieties that can lead to behaviors similar to the signs of sexual molestation. Do not, however, simply discount the behavior as homesickness. Immediately bring it to the attention of the camp director or nurse. You are in a position to be a comfort and aid to the campers placed in your care. Even if the child's behavior is a result of homesickness, his or her camp experience will be much more enjoyable if the cause of the distress is addressed, and the child feels comfortable discussing it.

What to Do

At some point your campers may tell you that someone has molested them. This may have occurred at home or camp. If this happens, we want you to be prepared to help the child. Follow the guidelines noted below if a child indicates that he or she may have been the victim of abuse or exploitation.

DON'T panic or overreact to the information disclosed by the child.

DON'T criticize the child or claim that the child misunderstood what happened.

DON'T blame the child.

DO respect the child's privacy. Take the child to a place that is comfortable and where the other campers cannot overhear you. It is important for you to limit your discussions of the child's situation to ones with the camp director and nurse and a representative of the child-protective-services agency for your state. It should not become the topic of conversation in the staff lounge or other parts of the camp. Camp is a hard place to keep information confidential. Your campers should not have to pay the price of your indiscretion and become the subject of camp gossip.

DO encourage the camper to tell the camp director or nurse. Make sure that the child feels reassured in coming forward. Tell the child that it is okay to talk with appropriate adults about what happened. Try to avoid repeated interviews about the incident because this can be stressful for the child.

Precautions Against Accusations of Sexual Abuse or Exploitation

Child abuse is a serious criminal offense. As a camp counselor with the responsibility of caring for children, you may be placed in sensitive situations making you vulnerable to charges of child molestation. Groundless accusations can be minimized by

- having other staff members present when supervising showers, changes into swimming suits, or other circumstances in which the child may be dressing or undressing.
- respecting the privacy of the child. Do not become intrusive or curious more than is necessary to monitor the health and safety of the child.

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- respecting the child's wishes regarding displays of affection. Children have the right to reject displays of affection if they feel uncomfortable about them. Remember that not every child comes from a background in which affection is openly displayed.
- protecting your own privacy. In some camp living situations, counselors room with their campers. There will be a natural curiosity about boyfriends or girlfriends; personal relationships; and, with some of the older campers, sexual activity. You should use common sense in discussing sensitive subjects with your campers, and you should not go into the details of your private life. Be careful about what you say in front of the children because sexually suggestive remarks, even made in jest, can be misinterpreted by a child.

Sexual exploitation should not be confused with physical contacts that are true expressions of affection. A warm and healthy relationship can exist between the camper and camp staff if staff members respect the child and place reasonable limits on their physical interaction.

Guidelines for Camp Directors

One of the hardest things for us to accept and understand is the fact that there are people who sexually molest or exploit children. The facts, however, are undeniable. Sexual victimization is a serious problem. Given the number of children who attend camp each summer, we can no longer deny the existence of this form of exploitation, nor can we deny our responsibility to report suspected abuse to child-protective services. And the laws that mandate this carry criminal and

civil penalties for failure to comply. We suggest that you contact the reporting agency in your state to determine your legal responsibilities for reporting. You may want to invite a representative from the agency to a staff training session.

There are several situations that you may encounter involving suspected child-sexual abuse in your camp. These include a camper who indicates, through behaviors or statements, that he or she was sexually abused prior to coming to camp; camper who claims that he or she was sexually molested while at camp; and minor camp staff member who may have been sexually abused at home or camp. All these situations require your immediate attention and action.

In cases of previous sexual abuse, you must report the suspected abuse, even if it may have occurred in another state. The child-protective services in your state can arrange for their counterparts in the other state to investigate.

In cases of sexual abuse at camp, it is especially important to make a prompt report. Your camp staff should be informed during the pre-camp training that **any** criminal conduct involving the camp staff will be reported to authorities—especially any criminal conduct in which the health or safety of the campers may be threatened. Make it clear to camp staff that inappropriate behavior of any kind will not be tolerated.

Do not be afraid to report abuse to the authorities. Also it is not enough simply to fire the abuser—you must carefully document the allegations. These cases deserve to be pursued through the criminal process and, if the evidence supports the allegation, strict sanctions applied. Only in this way can we truly protect children.

There are other safeguards camp directors can take to help ensure that the children who attend have a positive experience. These include

- making certain the camper-to-counselor ratio is adequate to provide proper supervision. Be sure to keep in mind that younger children require more supervision.
- providing structured activities with variety geared toward promoting teamwork and self-esteem.
- providing proper training to camp counselors encouraging them to work with the children and properly implement the activities offered by the camp.
- making certain that field trips and other outings are adequately supervised with provisions for handling any emergencies that may arise.
- performing a background screening and thorough reference checks on potential employees. Check the prospective employee against the appropriate state's sex-offender registry.

We all want the experience at summer camp to be a happy, carefree one for our children in which boys and girls experience independent living, develop an appreciation for nature, and work on their social skills. In order for us to provide our children with this carefree environment, however, we as adults must act responsibly and face the fact that child victimization and sexual abuse are harsh realities. A realistic approach to child safety is essential to protecting those for whom we really care.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization, serves as a clearinghouse of information about missing and exploited children; provides technical assistance to the public and law-enforcement agencies; offers training programs to law-enforcement and social-service professionals; distributes photographs and descriptions of missing children worldwide; creates and coordinates child-protection education and prevention programs and publications; networks with nonprofit service providers and state clearinghouses regarding missing-child cases; and provides information about effective legislation to help ensure the protection of children per 42 U.S.C. §§ 5771 *et seq.*; 42 U.S.C. § 11606; and 22 C.F.R. § 94.6.

A 24-hour, toll-free telephone line, **1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)**, is available in Canada, Mexico, and the United States for those who have information regarding missing and exploited children. The "phone free" number when dialing internationally is 00-800-0843-5678. The CyberTipline® is available worldwide for online reporting of those crimes at www.cybertipline.com. The TTY line is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number when dialing within the United States is 703-224-2150. The business number when dialing from other countries is 001-703-522-9320. The NCMEC facsimile number is 703-224-2122. The NCMEC web-site address is www.missingkids.com.

For information regarding the services offered by our NCMEC branches, please call them directly in California at 714-508-0150, Florida at 561-848-1900, Kansas City at 913-469-

5437, New York at 585-242-0900, and South Carolina at 803-254-2326.

A number of publications, addressing various aspects of the missing- and exploited-child issue, are available free of charge in single copies by contacting the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's Publications Department at



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