



Considerations for Summer Camp Safety 2015

Camps around the US provide summers of fun and memories to thousands of youth. However, some youth and staff have less than fond memories because of incidents and/or accidents that have occurred. Safe-Wise Consulting has analyzed data from various sources including the insurance industry, litigation records, industry groups and the federal government in order to help provide guidance in managing the risks associated with summer programming for both day and resident camps.

Managing Risks

A common formula for managing risks includes identification, analysis, assessment, strategy implementation and the development of a written plan. Plans and strategies should be reviewed on at least an annual basis to ensure they are effective and that current data and trends are included in the risk management practices of camp programs. Accidents and incidents usually result from one or more of the following causes: unsafe conditions, unsafe actions, unsafe equipment, and/or poor judgment. These causes can be minimized through inspection, review of health logs, review of accident trends or reports, staff orientation, training and proactive supervision practices.

Severity Risks

Some aspects of camp programs present the types of risks that are not commonly realized but are ever-present and therefore must always be considered. These "Severity" risks include drowning prevention and other serious aquatic incidents, transportation or vehicular incidents, child abuse incidents, environmental incidents and staff safety considerations. In the last five years, 60 campers under the age of 18 have died, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Half of the known deaths in the last five years were drownings; others resulted from dozens of causes, including snake bites and sudden onset of illnesses such as meningitis. No statistics are collected nationally about serious injuries affecting the five million or so children who annual participate in camp programs.

Common Incidents

For the purpose of this document we have categorized "Frequency" or the most common incidents or causes at summer camps into the following five (5) categories:

Trips, Slips, and Falls

These are the most commonly reported causes of injury in day and resident camps according to the American Camps Association (ACA). Workers Compensation data would suggest this is true for employees as well. The ACA reports that resident camps see close to 30 percent of all injuries to be sprains or strains resulting from a trip, slip, or fall. Ankle, foot, and toe injuries are often caused by rough terrain and improper footwear. Camps should develop policies regarding footwear that restrict flip-flops or sandals to "wet" areas such as the waterfront or shower areas. Both campers and staff

should adhere to a policy that requires closed-toed shoe during all active periods of the day. Closed-toed shoes are often the best choice for camps with areas of rough terrain, steep inclines or slippery slopes.

Health and Medical

Health and medical issues are fairly common at summer camps. According to the ACA the illness rate for campers and staff is almost twice that of injuries to the same groups. Each program should make an annual review of its health logs and accident reports prior to the new season in order to include trending and prevention information into program planning and staff training. National trends suggest that infectious diseases are most often transmitted in resident cabins for overnight camps and during meal times in general. Health screening practices are important for all summer programs and encouraging good hygiene habits (hand washing, showers before pool use) can help prevent transmittable sickness outbreaks such as common diseases and waterborne illnesses. Prevention of common sicknesses should be considered with the same energy that is used in accident prevention. Two common causes of sickness in summer programs are dehydration and fatigue. The importance of proper hydration cannot be stressed enough for both campers and staff. Dehydration related issues can range from the minor to the serious. Fatigue, especially among staff is a contributing factor to many illnesses and injuries. Proper rest and breaks must be considered and encouraged for staff. Good general health screening and practices can also help prevent other less-common but ever-possible issues such as head lice and bed bugs. Your program's health and medical planning/training must also include practices for dispensing medications and dealing with the ever growing list of special medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes and food (or other) allergies.

Managing Behaviors

Whether it is high energy campers, young staff members or simply someone that seems like they cannot get along with others, managing behavior is an integral part of every program and every day. Many behavior related issues can be attributed to a single root cause; the quality of supervision. Staff to camper ratios are important for supervision levels but the actual quality of supervision is what needs to be addressed. A look at program accident trends shows that "free time" leads the way for both camper and staff accidents. Free time cannot be unorganized and unstructured. Parameters must be set for these periods of the day where "free time" is more of structured "free choice" programming. Staff should be especially careful for free play activity periods where they may become complacent with their supervision practices; they should be ever mindful during periods such as playground times. Child abuse prevention training for staff and prevention practices must be part of all summer programs. Training and prevention efforts must address the common issues such as neglect and bullying as well as the severity of sexual or physical abuse.

Staff Training

How can staff training be included in a list of common incidents? The safety of programs is built on a foundation of staff training. Programs that do not address risk management or that provide only minimal hours of training are more likely to see incidents at both the

frequency and severity levels. Staff that are younger, less trained and/or less experienced are much more likely to get injured in summer programs. Staff training must include topics related to the severity issues discussed throughout this document as well as the seemingly mundane more frequent causes of incidents. New ideas and information must be integrated into staff training so that both new and returning staff learn about and grasp the importance of safety. Staff must understand that the culture of the program is driven and controlled by their actions. Everything from aquatic safety and abuse prevention all the way to trips and falls is controlled by how staff perform and encourage good safety practices. Staff must understand the importance of following camp rules and encouraging others to do the same. A common cause of staff injury is their participation in activities and/or play with campers. Staff training should include discussions and/or role playing of how it is best for staff to be involved with activities while also controlling the action and ensuring good safety practices are followed. A good rule of thumb for them to remember is that they can participate but need to remember they should not have a compelling interest in the outcome of any game or competition. Their emphasis should be on creating fun, encouraging others, building camper's self-esteem and not necessarily on winning.

Specialty Programs

No list would be complete without the "catch-all" category. The variety of summer program activity offerings is wide and ever growing. However, looking at programs such as climbing, ropes courses, equestrian, water sports and cycling we can see some common trends that should be communicated. The use of recommended protective equipment by both campers and staff must be part of your program's culture and routine. The ACA reports that the failure to use proper protective equipment contributed to 50 percent of injuries where the use of protective equipment was recommended. Staff must set the example by not only using protective equipment themselves but must also make it mandatory for others; there cannot be any gray area when it comes to its use. Head injuries, including concussions, mouth and eye injuries, are on the rise. The ACA reports that something as surprising as blows-to-the-head, from running into a tree to being hit in the head with a piece of sports equipment, are in the top five list of injuries for campers in day and resident camps. Motor development of youth; especially those under the age of 8 may contribute to these injuries as youth build coordination and balance. Programs should be planned while considering the use of protective equipment, age (developmental) appropriateness, interaction with staff and the type of surface used for activities. The ACA suggests making "plan for the worst" a guiding principle for planning camp activities.

Additional summer program safety information is available from
the American Camp Association and the [Safe-Wise Online Resource Library](#).