

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Bereavement Camps

Many hospice organizations across the United States hold annual or semi-annual bereavement camps. These camps are specifically geared to children and their families, and are found to be very helpful in the grief healing process. Because of the fact that these camps are for an especially vulnerable group, it is even more important to address all the important safety issues up front.

Planning and Preparing for Camp

One very important risk management strategy 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. Before choosing a location, an on-site visit is advisable. Many campgrounds have significant water hazards, such as swimming pools, rivers, or lakes. Should you decide to include water activities as part of your planned program, you will need to address the additional safety issues specific to that risk.

Cabins should be evaluated for safety and comfort level. All buildings that are used for sleeping quarters should be equipped with smoke detectors and fire extinguishers.

It is recommended that you choose a camp that is accredited by the American Camp Association (www.acacamps.org). The standards that are part of an accreditation process generally lay the framework for a safer organization.

Issues that should be addressed 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 since the hours are limited and observation and supervision of the campers tends to be more focused. Camps that include parental involvement and supervision are also less risky, since the parent retains responsibility for the minor.

The format for the camp, daily itinerary and list of activities should be established well in advance of the camp session. Senior management should review the planned activities, evaluating them for both content and safety.

Staffing Levels and Ratios

In most cases, the staff or volunteer ratio to campers tends to be 1:1 (or even better in some instances). It is important that staff levels be established based on the anticipated number of campers. Higher staffing levels allow for closer supervision of the campers and more one on one interaction. It also keeps the focus on the individual child, rather than the group, which tends to have a therapeutic effect.

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Operational Policies and Procedures

There should be bereavement camp-specific policies and procedures within the Bereavement Program. Some issues to be addressed include:

- Documentation of camper-specific information including contact information, health/medication history, and consent
- General camp safety procedures
- Security procedures, including what to do in the event of a missing camper
- Management of a medical incident or emergency
- 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 your patients/families, you should verify that background checks are required by their employer also. Background checks should include the National Sex Offender database and any applicable state sexual abuse registries.

When hiring staff, require at least three references. Child abuse prevention experts recommend that you include 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.

There should be a clear policy in your organization that abuse of any type will not be tolerated. Camp environments often provide opportunities for staff to be alone with children, so policies should be established to 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

Procedures should be in place for management of emergency situations. All staff should be aware of the steps to take in the event of a medical or other emergency, such as severe weather conditions. 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 all pertinent procedures for the camp setting. It might be valuable to have at least one satellite phone available, since cell phone use is not always reliable in emergency situations.

Education/Training

Prior to the start of each camp, there should be a training program to refresh the staff’s knowledge of camp procedures, documentation requirements and safety issues. This should be 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

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- Food Safety (if staff will be involved in food preparation)
- 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 all the “what if” scenarios that might compromise the safety of a child or adult at camp. Taking a proactive risk analysis approach during the planning and preparation phase will alert you to potential safety concerns and allow you to minimize risk. Assigning one or two staff members as “safety experts” may serve to emphasize the priority of safety among all staff. Including front line staff in the evaluation of safety heightens the objectivity of the analysis and often serves to identify issues that management may not have considered. The bottom line is that safety should be everyone’s priority and everyone’s responsibility. That is what will make camp safe for everyone, staff and campers alike.