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**Summer Camp Safety: Essential Questions Parents Should Ask**

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Kids love summer camp: Day camp, overnight camp, camps for swimming, sailing, hiking, biking, tennis, theatre, outdoor cooking, bird watching and more. Summer camp brings a boost of independence for children. As a child protection expert, it also brings to mind thoughts of safety procedures, medical protocols and emergency aid measures that should be securely in place at each site.

Here are a few questions that I recommend parents ask before they sign their child up for camp.

- Does the camp have ACA accreditation? The American Camp Association evaluates the camp's safety, health, program and camp operations. Some states have more in-depth standards needed for camp operators. New York State, for example, requires camp operators to develop a written plan which reflects the camp's compliance with health code requirements.
- How are staff screened? It's good to know the background and experience of the counselors caring for your child. The camp operator should verify information on resumes and maintain files with appropriate qualifications needed for the job, such as licenses, certifications and references. Some states require a criminal background check and a search of the sex offender registry, too. Find out how the camp handles these issues.
- What is the ratio of staff to children? In day camp, there must be one senior counselor for every six children under the age of 6; one for every nine children between the ages of 6 and 7 and one for every twelve children who are 8 years old and above. For overnight camp you should make sure that there is one senior counselor for every six children age 7 or under and one for eight children that are 8 years old and above. The camp should also explain to parents how supervision of the campers takes place, particularly on field trips, activities that may be risky, such as swimming, and, in overnight camps, during the nighttime, before and after lights out.
- What trainings do staff receive to keep children safe? All of the staff should be trained in fire safety and the camp should have a plan to prevent and respond to fires. Fire drills should be held within the first day or two of

each camping session and then as needed during the duration of the camp. Staff should also be trained in recognizing and reporting child physical abuse. The counselors should have a clear understanding of inappropriate disciplinary procedures and what to do if they encounter others using them. They should also be trained in recognizing signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse. Parents should find out how the camp disciplines children, and in what type of circumstances they would be contacted if their child's behavior was problematic.

- How does the camp screen visitors? Parents should make sure that there is a method for making sure that unauthorized visitors are not allowed access to their child. It's also important for the camps to account for attendance and dismissal from camps. Parents should have a plan in place designating how the child is to leave the camp, including the names of those that have permission to visit or escort their child home.
- How does the camp handle emergencies? Parents should feel entitled to ask about past emergencies, including injuries and deaths, and the plan that the camp follows should one occur. This includes situations such as a lost child, a child hurt during an activity, a child becoming ill with food poisoning or having a severe allergic reaction. Find out about CPR and First Aid certifications, what type of medical staff is available and the hospital with which the camp is affiliated. Along these lines, parents should provide a full description of any medications their child needs, allergies that the child has and emergency contact information so that they can be contacted if something happens to their child. Find out how the meds are stored, distributed and recorded too.
- How will your child be oriented to the camp? It's recommended that the child receive a tour of the camp including both the fun spaces and those that are designated as potentially dangerous or off-limits, along with the reasons why they should not enter them. Campers should be instructed and encouraged to report incidents of bullying, child abuse or any illness or injury to staff members. The buddy system, used often in swimming excursions, should be explained; as should the plan that is followed if a camper is lost. Camps should use scenarios so that the child feels prepared if they become lost. Fire drills, evacuation procedures and the importance of not playing with matches/lighters should be reviewed too.
- What should you look for if your child is developmentally challenged? There are additional requirements for camps serving children with disabilities such as cerebral palsy, autism, mental disability or epilepsy. There must be a qualified camp director with experience in working with the developmentally disabled on site. The ratio of staff to children may be as small as one counselor for every two children; it depends on the level of the disability. Parents should make sure that the camp facilities, grounds and vehicles accommodate developmentally disabled children. The camp health director must also be located on-site during camp operation.

Knowledge is power. Don't be afraid to ask these and other questions before you entrust your child to a summer camp. It's important to ensure that your children have a wonderful, exciting and safe experience. For more information on keeping your child safe visit [www.NYSPCC.org](http://www.NYSPCC.org).