

RISK MANAGEMENT

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Why Do Camp Staff Members Get Hurt?

Campers and staff have equal opportunity to be injured at camp because they spend their days, (and in resident camps, their nights) engaged in the same activities of camp life. Since they are exposed to the same risks, they experience similar patterns of injury. The exceptions of course are kitchen and maintenance staff members, who are engaged in other risky activities.

ACA's Healthy Camp Study, which monitored results from participating camps from 2006–2010, reported that campers and staff from both resident and day camps experienced a relatively low rate of injury when compared to certain youth sports activities. This is obviously good news.

Campers were injured slightly more frequently than staff. Gender didn't play a part in how often campers were injured, but female staff members were more likely to be injured than male staff at day and resident camps. The reason for this was not apparent in the study. What is your experience? Was this an anomaly in the study, or do you think this may be a valid pattern?

The Healthy Camp Study identified factors that contributed to staff injuries. Experienced camp directors will agree with these and perhaps add some others as well. Why do camp employees get hurt? The following list of factors is a compilation — in no particular priority — based upon the Healthy Camp Study and experience.

Unsafe and Improper Actions

Ever catch yourself saying, "Why did he (or she) do that?" This reaction often follows hearing about or observing unsafe staff behavior that results in a near miss or an injury. Very often, judgment was lacking, and in other cases, there was a near-complete lack of understanding of the risks involved. Close your eyes for a moment and remember that incident from the summer when . . . Oh, too scary — sorry! Let's call this failure to think and anticipate consequences.

"Gray" Period Athletic Injuries

"Gray" period athletic injuries occur when staff members have time off between periods during the day at day camps, or are on a day off at resident camp. The injuries often involve reinjuring a body part (ankle, knee, hand, wrist, finger), that might have been prevented if the employee had used a previously prescribed protective device — such as a knee brace, for example — after the first injury.

Besides the failure to use personal protective equipment, the root cause of these athletic injuries often involves failure to warm up, over use, over exuberance, or misuse of equipment. By the way, "gray" period athletic injuries sustained by staff are most likely not covered by workers compensation insurance. Do you require staff to have health insurance, or does your camp provide protection for them under an accident medical insurance policy?

Horseplay with Campers

Anyone with siblings knows horseplay is a part of daily life, and horseplay at camp is certainly no different. Some experienced directors might also say horseplay is an inherent risk that can be managed but not eliminated.

Every summer, someone (a camper or staff member) is injured when horseplay fun goes too far. Knowing when and how to stop the horseplay before injury is a key decision-making skill. How do you manage horseplay behavior at your camp? Have employees been injured? What skills do they need to protect themselves and campers from horseplay injury?

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Inadequately Maintained Equipment and Conditions Inherent in the Premises

The Healthy Camp Study reported slips, trips, and falls as major sources of injuries. Inappropriate footwear (e.g., flip flops for basketball or hiking rough trails in open-toed sandals) was cited as an underlying factor contributing to these injuries.

Other places where staff may slip, trip, and fall include swimming pools, showers, kitchens, ropes courses, hiking trails, sports fields, porches, and decks. Conditions inherent in the premises may be contributing factors. Liquid spills in the kitchen present a slipping hazard; wear and tear on zip line cables, carabineers, and pulleys present a fall risk from height; woodchuck holes in playing fields, which sometimes seem to appear overnight, can result in nasty injuries if you step in them while running. Risk is constantly changing — that is why risk management requires a critical thought process and discerning judgment.

Fatigue

It is well known that fatigue contributes to accidents and injuries. The ACA Healthy Camp study urged staff to take care of themselves to reduce the risk of illness. Let's reiterate this statement for reducing the risk of injury.