

No More

The statistics are staggering. A study funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and completed in 2001 concluded that more than 300,000 children in the United States are sexually victimized each year. Less than 35 percent of them will file a police report, according to findings in 2000 from researchers at the Medical University of South Carolina.

Many Christian camp directors have asked, "Could it happen here?" as child sexual exploitation scandals have unfolded in the media over the past decade. As a result, policies and procedures have changed dramatically in camping ministries across the nation.

Indeed, camp managers and their staff can play a pivotal role in preventing and detecting child sexual exploitation.

"We want to create the safest place possible for kids to come and have the opportunity to experience God's presence in their lives," says Bob Pryor of Camp Hanover in Virginia. "Anything we can do to create a safe environment physically and emotionally for children, we want to try to do."

Check It Out

The employment process is the first line of defense against poten-

tial victimizers. Ruth Dalager Buuck coordinates background checks for camps affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in three states.

"People assume camps are doing checks," Buuck says. "The fact that we do background research weeds out certain candidates who might not want that kind of investigation."

Consultant Tom Nielsen, who advises camps affiliated with the American Baptist Association, notes that access to uniform records at the national level is problematic, forcing many camps to use background check companies.

"Obviously, the best thing would be a local and federal check," says Pat Hammond, director of standards at the American Camp Association. Because there is no national system, she says, it is tough to get checks that are reasonable in cost, comprehensive, and up-to-date.

Most camp managers or administrative leaders interviewed say they run background checks on camp staff applicants or strongly advise camps to do so. The extensiveness of their checks varies. Some run both state and national background checks on all counselors and support staff, and others run checks through only a local law enforcement agency.

Needless Tears

How your ministry can respond to the issue of child sexual exploitation

Camps that don't run state and federal level background checks are endangering the children they serve, says prevention expert Nancy McBride, national safety director for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC).

"What price can you place on a child's innocence and trust?" McBride says. "Your staff and volunteers who have never gone through a check will understand why you may need to

change your policies in light of the potential risks to children."

Companies that insure religious organizations urge their clients to minimize the likelihood of child sexual exploitation. Church Mutual, which insures hundreds of CCCA organizations, recommends background checks be done and notes that organizations mandating background checks is an increasing trend. GuideOne Insurance

advises its clients that a state background check is not enough to prevent a victimizer from coming into contact with children and recommends an FBI national check.

"I've not heard of resistance to background checks," says Mark Burkhardt, the director for outdoor ministries with the ELCA. "Once they are educated about the importance of child protection, most people make an attempt to comply."

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Staff Cautions

Safeguarding your camp or conference against child sexual exploitation and responding appropriately to any unfortunate incidents requires clear communication with your team. The outline below can be used in a training session for summer or full-time staff.

The Problem	Precautions	Warning Signs	Disclosure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Explain that the camp has an obligation to provide a safe, caring, and nurturing environment for children. ▶ Communicate a zero-tolerance policy for child victimization, sexual exploitation, or sexual harassment of any kind at the camp. ▶ Discuss the number of children who are sexually exploited and the likelihood of children who have been victimized being at the camp. ▶ Talk about the impact of sexual exploitation on children's lives and on camping ministry. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Discuss on-site safety policies such as visitor screening, securing the camp, and access to cabins during the day. ▶ Review guidelines about physical affection between counselors and campers. ▶ Use the two-staff-person rule, and give examples of how this can be applied. ▶ Explain that one-on-one conversations with campers must be in a location where the adult and the camper can be easily seen. ▶ Go over appropriate ways to respond with affection: Never force a child to give affection to an adult or teen if he or she doesn't want to, and hug campers from the side or give a pat on the back; do not give full frontal hugs. 	<p>Review warning indicators of child sexual exploitation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Behavior changes, extreme mood swings, withdrawal, fearfulness, and excessive crying ▶ Nightmares, fear of going to bed, bed-wetting, sleep disturbances ▶ Inappropriate sexual activity, an unusual interest in sexual matters, or a knowledge of sexual matters beyond the child's years ▶ Sudden acting out or aggressive or rebellious behavior ▶ Regression to infantile behavior ▶ Fear of certain places, people, or activities, especially being alone with specific individuals ▶ Pain, itching, bleeding, fluid, or rawness in the private areas ▶ Signs that a child may be trying to avoid someone 	<p>Describe the appropriate response from a camp counselor to a camper disclosing victimization.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Do not blame the victim or make judgments. ▶ Don't try to conduct your own investigation. ▶ Reassure the child that he or she will be protected and that you will take what he or she shared with you seriously. ▶ Avoid having the child repeat the allegations. Doing so may traumatize the child. ▶ Report incidents or suspected incidents to a camp director or supervisor immediately. ▶ Remember that confidentiality is important so allegations do not become camp gossip. ▶ Immediately report incidents or suspected incidents to the reporting agency mandated in your state. <p style="text-align: right;">—Ami Neiberger-Miller</p>

Reassuring parents has become very important to camps.

"If they are accredited [with ACA] they are very proud of that," Burkhardt says. "A lot of them are specifically saying we do background checks and staff training."

Staff Safeguards

Once staff members are hired, camps should spell out expectations for behavior clearly.

"We live in such a sexually charged society. Camp managers should set their standards high for staff behavior," McBride says. "Don't accept sexual harassment, off-color remarks, or inappropriate touching among your staff, and make it very clear that there will be no tolerance for this behavior with children."

Supervision is critical to prevent and detect exploitation. Nielsen recommends that two counselors be placed in every cabin that houses campers. Having a low staff-to-camper ratio also helps, observed several managers.

"The best thing we have is a low ratio of one to six," says Gary Greenwald of Camp Glisson in Georgia. "We also have multiple layers of staff supervision."

Emphasizing proper staff roles and how to avoid awkward situations gives staff guidelines for how to behave, notes Gretchen Bachman, program director for Good Earth Village in Minnesota.

"If a male camper asks a female staff member to talk to him, get a third person to join the conversation," she says. "If the camper insists on talking to only one person, then they should sit out in the open where anyone can see them."

Hammond advises camps to make sure children are properly supervised at night or during unstructured time to prevent child-to-child incidents.

Training

Hammond also recommends staff training in behavior management techniques, so your team members know how to discipline children and interact respectfully with campers.

"Stress to your staff: They cannot be

alone with campers," says Jerry Lapeer of the Michigan Christian Youth Camp.

He also says it's important for staff to understand what kinds of physical affection toward campers are acceptable, as sometimes actions are misinterpreted.

"If a child pulls away, don't force them to be hugged. My hug may mean one thing to me, but to a child it may be very different," Lapeer says. "Full frontal hugs are not OK any more. Any time you hug it should be from the side, or you can give a pat on the back."

Interactive training for staff is often most effective. "You should review your policies, your expectations of the staff, warning indicators to look out for, and what to do if a child reports exploitation to a counselor," McBride says. She recommends using "what if this happens" scenarios or role-playing to help staff think through how policies and procedures are really applied.

Sometimes camp managers will bring in an expert such as a psychologist or an attorney to address camp staff members. Greenwald invites Joy Thornburg Melton, an attorney and author who specializes in child victimization issues, to talk to his staff at Camp Glisson. It can be a difficult session for staff, he says.

"You've got to realize that among 80 students at orientation, there's a percentage who have been victimized themselves."

Spotting Signs

In addition to training staff to avoid inappropriate behaviors, it's important to help summer and year-round staff members spot signs of child exploitation, whether at home or at camp. The most important thing to do is be aware of changes in a child's behavior.

"Children don't just change their personality overnight for no good reason," McBride says. If you notice a child who is normally quiet acting out, or a child who is normally boisterous sitting in a corner, ask what is wrong. "A child should feel he or she can seek you out."

Camp nurses and waterfront staff are often the ones who notice unusual markings on a child (see sidebar for specific signs). Notice any bruises or marks without invading a child's privacy.

"Our camp nurse documents everything in her log," says Lapeer, who notes that the state recommended the nurse screen children when they arrive at camp for signs of exploitation.

Camp staff should also be alert to signs that a child may be trying to avoid someone. Children should not be forced to give affection to an adult or teenager if they don't want to.

Guest Groups

Although staff can be trained in what to watch for and how to behave, what about when other groups rent the camp's facilities? At Camp Glisson, churches contracting to use the property are sent child protection information. Whether or not they follow the advice is up to them.

"We don't check the churches using the facilities," Greenwald says. "I would say we could do more, but I'm not sure there is a practical way to do that."

It's not an easy issue to talk about.

"Realize that it does happen," says Bachman, who instituted background checks for staff at her camp three years ago. The key to addressing child sexual exploitation through a camping ministry is not just policies, Bachman says. It's being vigilant.

"Camp managers have to be constantly aware and not get complacent," she says. "Just because it's never happened doesn't mean it won't." ■

Editor's note: A special session at the 2005 National Convention and Exhibition will address background checks.



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Related Resources

In CCCA's Store

■ 7 Keys to Understanding Child Abuse (Focus Series)

■ Safe Place: Guidelines for Creating an Abuse-Free Environment edited by Marv Parker

■ Safe Sanctuaries for Youth: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in Youth Ministries by Joy Thornburg Melton

On the Internet

■ Church Mutual Insurance www.churchmutual.com

■ "For Camp Counselors: Guidelines About Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation"; order 50 free copies at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's website, www.missingkids.com

■ Guide One Insurance www.guideonecenter.com

■ Sound Word's CCCA audio recordings, "Managing Your Camp's Exposure to Sexual Allegations" and "Safe and Savvy Counselors" www.soundword.com