

Lessons Learned from ACA's Crisis Hotline in 2021

November 30, 2021

Part of the magic of camp is the unexpected. In most cases, the unexpected means spontaneous, unscripted moments of connection, growth, and renewal — but the unexpected can also mean uncertainty, or even a crisis or emergency. The examples shared here are crisis situations that happened at actual camps last summer for you to use as an emergency planning and staff training resource. All of the situations presented are based on calls made by camp professionals to the ACA Camp Crisis Hotline in 2021.

ACA's Camp Crisis Hotline is a free, call-in resource for camp and youth development professionals that is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The crisis hotline team consists of ACA staff members who are trained to listen and offer guiding questions a caller might consider when faced with a crisis or unexpected situation. Our goal for each call is to help the caller identify where in their own policies and procedures they might find a way to address the situation. We also share resources, many of which can be found on the [ACA Camp Crisis Hotline](#) web page.

How do we define a crisis? We don't. A crisis is any situation for which a camp professional — regardless of their ACA membership or accreditation status — might want support. From bedbugs to wildfires, difficult parents to bullying, we take every call seriously and do our best to provide resources and considerations for next steps.

Calls to the crisis hotline are confidential in that any information we share, we make sure it's not identifiable to camps — and this information is in no way connected to accreditation or used against a camp that calls.

The hotline team members are not legal experts nor medical personnel, yet many are former camp professionals and know from experience how easily a crisis at camp can occur.

Historically, calls to the crisis hotline fall into broad categories, and we track the number of calls in these categories over time to give us a sense of emerging issues. With this information we create professional development resources to help camp professionals prepare for and mitigate crisis situations that might be new to them or particularly challenging.

The team also offers an annual webinar and will frequently present at ACA conferences and events.

While we cannot prescribe a specific plan for how to handle an unexpected death or some other crisis, we highly encourage you to have a crisis plan that is revisited annually, planned, trained, and rehearsed.

Expose yourself to as many lessons learned as you can and apply those lessons to create solutions that are specific and unique to your camp. Crisis management isn't something you learn once; you build on your experience and reevaluate your risk management planning to minimize your exposure and develop your foundation to manage what comes your way. This discussion is about shedding light on situations and calls that we have received so you don't have to wait for these things to happen to you. Instead, you can start your educational and preparation journey now.

If you hear a colleague share a story about a crisis that happened in their camp, don't just ask "What did you do?" The more important question to ask is "What do you wish you had known to better prepare you to handle that?"

Emerging Issues from Hotline Calls In 2021

We consistently saw six emerging issues across all the call categories.

Active Supervision

- There is a staffing shortage in the camp industry right now. This may be one of the reasons why active supervision rose to the surface as the key preventable measure in health and safety this summer. It was also far more prevalent than we've heard in the last five years. From missing campers to camper-to-camper abuse, a well-trained staff and culture of strong supervision needs to be reinforced for camps.
- A theme of a lack of boundaries established by staff that led to concerning actions also emerged. Staff were not providing supervision that reduced the odds of problematic behavior occurring, including inappropriate conversations, touching, grooming, and abuse.

Increased Reporting of Sexual Misconduct

- Since the #MeToo movement, people are far more willing to come forward and report incidents that they did not before. We heard directors worried and confused about false accusations, how to handle an investigation, and how to handle actions from an unwanted wink to sexual assault.
- This year there was a significant increase in camper-to-camper sexual misconduct.

- These incidents happened during staff time-off and when active supervision was limited (overnights, trips, cabin time).

Staff Shortage/Understaffed

- This summer we received a peak in complaint calls from both parents and staff about the consequences of being understaffed (lack of active supervision, increased sexual misconduct, etc.).

Custody Issues

- While complex and highly specific to each circumstance, camps lacked robust policies that clearly stated what a parent must provide to disclose custody or how camp would handle a situation if one parent could not be reached or there was a differing opinion from each parent/guardian.

Gender Issues

- We have seen camps evolve in their ability to manage gender issues that arise, and camper safety and belonging in camp is stronger. Challenges seem focused on parents of the camper and/or parents of other campers not understanding or agreeing with how gender is addressed in camp.
- Some same-gender/same-sex attraction occurred with campers that camps were not prepared to deal with or think through in the same ways they might deal with heteronormative behaviors.

Mental Health

- This season brought a unique dose of staff and campers feeling anxious and overwhelmed and lacking coping skills to get through typical activities in a camp day. Overall, camps seemed prepared or more ready to accept this year's mental health needs and challenges. This is good news. While mental health issues were still pervasive among hotline calls, they didn't necessarily rise to the level of crisis as they have in past seasons. Self-harm and threats of suicide were among the leading areas that camps struggled with in this category.

Call Categories

Take a closer look at the call categories and consider some of the takeaways for your program. We typically receive 100–150 calls per calendar year, and these calls fall into the following general categories.

Allegations of Abuse — 21 Percent of Calls in 2021

In the first time in a decade or longer, a category other than health and medical topped the list of calls. This summer, 21 percent of calls were related to allegations of abuse.

Of those calls:

- Sixty percent were camper-to-camper abuse.
- Twenty-eight percent were suspected at-home abuse.
- Twelve percent were staff-to-camper abuse.

These calls were up overall from previous years. While the pandemic may have been a factor in the rise of reports of abuse that happened at home, the abuse that took place in camp may be a direct result of camps being understaffed and unable to provide active supervision.

While many calls in the abuse issues category were about clarifying the mandated reporter laws and whether to call the authorities, the conversation often led to identifying the need for techniques/tips to manage communication with families and when one should or should not conduct official investigations. We suggest you work with your insurance company (in advance) on developing a plan that works best for your program.

Lessons Learned — Allegations of Abuse

The law is clear. You must contact authorities if there is an allegation of abuse. All camps fall into the category of a mandated reporter. Mandated reporters are people who have regular contact with vulnerable people and who are therefore legally required to ensure a report is made when abuse is observed or suspected. They may be paid or unpaid people who have the responsibility of care.

A note on mandated reporting to Child Protective Services (CPS): CPS typically investigates abuse in the home. Some counties have robust processes for screening out calls (automatically passing to other authorities) if the alleged abuse is outside of the home, and some will just tell you “We don’t deal with abuse outside of the home.” This is where relationships are key. Research your county’s process. Find the contact information of the sheriff or detective who investigates abuse of minors if it happens outside of the home.

For those of you working within a university system, what reporting guidelines exist? How do campus police affect how you’ll handle these situations?

Attentive, active, and involved staff supervision is the key to keeping campers from harming, bullying, or abusing each other. Allegations of camper-to-camper abuse often happen in those brief moments in time when staff are not directly engaged with campers — shower time, trips to the restroom, changing for the pool, the time between program and mealtime, just prior to bedtime, etc. It is imperative that your staff be trained to be even more watchful during these vulnerable times. If your camp does not have staff sleeping in the same room with campers, consider what you are doing to ensure there is no inappropriate behavior in the middle of the night.

See something, say something — teach your staff and campers to be ever vigilant and question what they see. It takes just one person to step up and question when they see something not right about the way an adult is interacting with a child. You may be the one who is able to free a child from serial abuse. Always have the best interest of the child in mind.

Camper Issues — 21 Percent of Calls n 2021

Camper issues can certainly intersect other categories, but some of the themes in this area were about behavior that often led to dismissal of a camper or behavior that was harmful in a physical or sexual manner. Times when bullying, physical assault, or sexual assault happened were frequently a result of less supervision in places like cabins at night, in showers, and other locales where there is sometimes a barrier between campers and staff supervision. It's worth reviewing these times and places to determine greater deterrence measures.

Other types of camper issue calls included:

- Suicidal comments
- Talk of self-harm
- Pranks that went too far
- Sexual curiosity — between same-sex campers, kissing, touching

Lessons Learned — Camper Issues

Strict and well-enforced staff supervision policies are key in decreasing camper behavior issues. Ensure that your procedures and staff training are designed not only to protect the safety of campers, but also to identify situations where campers could be tempted to behave inappropriately.

Ensure that parents and campers understand your camper behavior and related policies and consequences. If, for example, your camp has a policy that campers cannot have cell phones while

at camp, be sure campers and parents understand what specific consequence you will render if a cell phone is found.

Allegations of camper-to-camper abuse must be reported. Mandated reporter laws are clear. If you suspect that a camper has abused another camper, you must call the authorities. Mandatory reporting requirements are driven by the age of the *victim*, not the age of the abuser. The authorities may choose not to investigate if both parties are minors, but you still must report. The safety of children in your care must be your number-one priority!

Health and Medical Issues — 19 Percent of Calls in 2021

It's not surprising that health and medical calls didn't top the charts this year, as most camps spent more than a year highly focused on developing health and safety measures around COVID-19. Additionally, communicable disease measures that were in place were effective in minimizing other illness issues that sometimes affect camps.

By the time camp was in motion, most camps had developed local resources and advisory experts to help them manage COVID-specific guidelines, so anything that came up around COVID could be routed to these other experts and didn't necessitate a call to the crisis hotline.

Mental health issues also fall under this category and make up the largest percentage of calls in this area. It's critical that camps prepare for mental health concerns for campers and staff. A health/medical support system should be in place to address these needs as they arise.

Lessons Learned — Health and Medical Issues

Prepare for mental health concerns for campers and staff. Have a health/medical support system in place. The number of calls to the hotline on mental health concerns appeared to mirror a societal trend. Camps need to have a mental health support system in place and should add mental health resources and experts to the team and health care plan. This plan includes not just your on-site health care staff, but the list of contacts you would phone in the event of the unexpected. (e.g., mental health professionals, dentists, etc.)

In the event of a serious accident, injury, or infestation, an excellent communications plan is critical. Many callers this year just wanted help crafting messages about an incident that they could share with families, the media, and others.

Personnel and Staff Issues — 12 Percent of Calls in 2021

There continued to be several calls in the personnel and staff issues category related to issues that occurred during staff time-off and away from camp that interfered with staff members' jobs at camp and calls related to staff behaving inappropriately. Calls in the personnel/staff issues category were commonly related to gaps in a camp's personnel policies and/or inconsistent enforcement of currently established policies and practices.

Calls focused on staff behaving inappropriately included:

- Allegations of rape off property (adult-adult)
- Sexual harassment/misconduct
- Issues happening during staff time-off and away from camp programs

Unrelated to staff behaving inappropriately, we noted three common threads related to staff issues: staff burnout/mental health concerns; lack of active and engaged supervision; and lenience with staff breaking policy.

Calls in the personnel/staff issues category happened with staff who were minors, staff who were volunteers, during working time, and during time off. We heard about a full range of staff issues during the summer.

Lessons Learned — Personnel and Staff Issues

Set and enforce clear policies about acceptable relationships between staff while at camp. Numerous callers wanted to discuss sexual relationships between staff, including consensual as well as allegations of force. Understand that where adults are concerned, if an allegation of force is made, that is a police matter, and the alleged victim should contact the authorities. The authorities will help navigate what happens next with both the alleged victim and the alleged perpetrator.

Identify an employment attorney to provide you with legal counsel. Identify this resource before you begin your hiring cycle. An attorney with experience in labor laws, contracts, and employment issues who you can contact for help at any time is an invaluable resource for any camp. Many camps were incredibly resistant to use the authorities if allegations of rape or sexual misconduct came up, if a staff member physically harmed a child, etc. Having legal counsel readily available to you will help you protect yourself from risk.

Have a backup plan for staff coverage in an emergency or unexpected loss of staff. Supervision ratios are critical to ensuring the safety of your campers. What will you do if you have a policy against alcohol on property and you catch numerous staff drinking? Before the season

begins, identify short-term options you can turn to for staff coverage in an emergency.

Business Operations Issues — 8 Percent of Calls in 2021

Calls in the business operations category usually needed the assistance of one of the experts mentioned above or showed cracks in the policies and agreements that should be protecting your business. Issues arise when camps have not talked with their insurance company/agent or do not have legal counsel they can connect with. Issues also arise in this category because camps have not established positive relationships with their county health departments or the regulators they may be under.

Lessons Learned — Business Operations Issues

Camp is a business and operating a business is complex — seek and retain legal

counsel. While ACA cannot provide legal advice, we do help callers consider the questions to discuss with legal counsel. Good businesses also see the importance of having a solid relationship with their insurance agent, their local emergency response officials to include medical services, and a human resource professional.

It's all about relationships. Time spent during the year building contacts and creating relationships with local officials, fire and rescue, medical services, the health department, police department, merchants, etc., will serve your camp well in the future.

Parent Issues — 4 Percent of Calls in 2021

Calls regarding parent behavior can be some of the most difficult issues for camps. As camp professionals, we value partnering with parents, but sometimes they are not so amenable to the partnership. We again took calls related to managing custody situations where camps felt stuck in the middle. Even if they requested that parents prove custody, they were often asked for things that could negatively impact one of the parents, and they didn't want to be accountable or liable for how the information the camp had would be used by either party. Other parent issues included calls from parents demanding access to kids at camp, parents requesting contact information of other campers' parents, and parents insisting on receiving incident reports and/or documentation of events involving their children.

Lessons Learned — Parent Issues

Ensure that all families have a copy of and understand your camp's policies. This includes refund policies and consequences for noncompliance with camp policies.

Always have at least one — but preferably two — emergency contacts who are not the parents of the camper. We have had calls from camps about parents refusing to pick up their child early from camp when the camp has determined that they must expel the camper. Some parents simply want the camp to handle everything until the scheduled end of camp. If the camp is unable to get a parent or other emergency contact to take custody of the child in cases of threatening behavior, sometimes the camp's only recourse is to call the authorities to take custody. Be sure that your camp families understand your expectations and the parameters that might force you to determine that a child must be sent home — including any medical situations.

Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. An informed parent is a partner. An uninformed parent can become an adversary — with their children caught in the middle.

Implications for Your Camp — Case Studies

The hotline team identified the following case studies, which were actual calls to the ACA Camp Crisis Hotline, as helpful scenarios for a more in-depth look. These cases serve as examples for other camps to use in staff training and in the development of their own risk and crisis management plans. Our hope is that by understanding the actual crisis events encountered by other camps, your camp can learn and prepare. As a reminder, the hotline is completely confidential; consequently, some identifying facts about the camps in the case studies may have been changed to protect their identities.

Summer 2021 Case Studies

#1 Take My Child Back — Or Else!

The caller was concerned about a set of parents threatening legal action if their camper was not allowed to return to camp after being sent home for behavior reasons. The camp had sent two 17-year-old CITs home after they were seen in the same bed after lights out. The campers lived in separate cabins (so one camper was in an unauthorized place). The cabin counselor noticed the two campers in the bed and went to get the supervisor without addressing the campers. By the time they returned, the second camper was no longer in the cabin. Both campers denied it happened, implying the counselor was lying. Prior to the incident, the two CITs had been warned, on multiple occasions, that their day-to-day interactions were inappropriate. Refunds per the camp's refund policy were issued to the families and accepted. Subsequently, the parent of one of the campers had an attorney

send a letter to camp claiming that the child was wrongfully expelled and demanding that the camper be allowed back for the last week of camp or risk further legal action.

What can we learn from this case?

Policies and Risk Management

- Does camp provide information to parents prior to camp about the rules during camp, including behaviors that would be cause for expulsion?
- Does your camp have appropriate legal counsel secured to consult about determining the best course of action for various situations?
- Are camp policies different for legacy campers?
- Under what circumstances would you allow a camper to return to camp after expulsion for a behavior incident? What message would that send to other campers? Does it condone the behavior and the duplicity?
- If you allowed a camper to return, what specific stipulations would you require regarding behavioral expectations and consequences?

Staff Training

- Are camp staff trained to document misbehavior and the actions taken?
- Does your camp include CITs in staff training topics such as child protection and behavioral expectations of staff?

Key Takeaway

Be sure that parents are informed of camper behavior expectations and consequences for infractions before campers arrive.

Resources:

- [Are CIT Programs Worth the Risk? How Can They Meet Your Expectations?](#) *Camping Magazine*
- [20 Insider Tips for Working with Adolescents at Camp.](#) *Camping Magazine*

#2 Mental Wellness Is for Everyone

During rest period, a camper disclosed to their counselors that a voice in their head wanted them to harm others at the camp. The camper did not mention anything about self-harm. The camper was isolated in a safe place and being observed by health staff. Parents had been notified and were en

route to pick up the camper. The camp had kept good documentation throughout this process, but the camp director wanted to make sure they had considered all the resources that were available to them, including CPS.

What can we learn from this case?

Policies and Risk Management

- In case of a trip to the camp health center, when do you notify a parent/guardian?
- What role does the healthcare provider play?
- What role does the parent/guardian play?
- Do your healthcare policies address mental health issues?
- Do you have good documentation from all concerned parties?

Staff Training

- Do non-healthcare staff know what their role is with healthcare?
- Does healthcare staff know their role with healthcare and treatment procedures?
- Does camp require training around documentation?
- Are staff informed of release of medical treatment information?
- Are crisis scenarios a part of staff training?

Key Takeaway

Have a comprehensive emergency action that includes mental health crises, and make sure staff is comfortable implementing the steps.

Resources:

- [What Now? Understanding and Supporting Campers with Mental Health Issues](#). *Camping Magazine*
- [Mental Health Issues in Camp](#) — 90-minute recorded webinar

#3 A Case of Indecent Exposure

During time off from work and at their own home (not on camp property), a staff member went skinny dipping. Someone from town reported it to the police and the person was charged with indecent exposure. The staff person is a valuable asset to the camp but has been suspended from working there. The staff member is a local, year-round community resident in a lake town. During the

summer, camp operates a single-gender residential camp and most of the campers are from away. Little or no staff from the community traditionally have been hired by the camp, so it was groundbreaking to have this local resident on staff.

Perception is reality. What steps does the camp take due to perception, especially of its camp families?

What can we learn from this case?

Policies and Risk Management

- What is your relationship like with your local community? Could that relationship lead to why the police were notified?
- Would an infraction like this be cause for terminating an employee?
- Do you have access to legal counsel familiar with employment law?

Staff Training

- What do discipline and/or consequences look like when staff act inappropriately off camp and off duty?
- Are staff trained on expectations of their time-off behavior that could impact the camp?
- Are staff trained to understand that their time-off activity cannot diminish their ability to lead and care for young people the moment they return to camp property?

Key Takeaway

Behavior of camp staff during time off can reflect back on the camp.

Resources:

- [Wise Use of Time Off](#). *Camping Magazine*
- [Off Duty and the Camp Is My Playground \(What Could Go Wrong?\)](#). *CampLine*

#4 Camper-to-Camper Sexual Abuse Allegation

A 10-year-old camper at an overnight camp accused another 10-year-old camper of sexual misconduct. The reporting camper alleged that the abuse occurred during shower time and then again during time in the cabin. The accused camper denied the incident occurred.

The camp procedures for showering require that staff members are present outside of the shower building, so they are within earshot but not visually watching campers while they shower. The camp procedures for supervision in the cabin include that staff are always present when campers are in

the cabin. In both instances, the staff members were present per policy guidelines (outside the shower house and in the cabin).

Both campers were returning campers. The one reporting the abuse had been dismissed from camp previously for behavior issues and was not allowed to return for two years. The two campers had known each other for three years with no other reported issues.

What can we learn from this case?

Policies and Risk Management

- Given the reported incidents, should the camp alter its staff supervision policy?
- How does the camp confirm the details of the reported incidents if one camper reports inappropriate behavior and the other denies it occurred?
- What role do the campers' families play in the case?
- At what point does the camp involve the families of the campers?
- What information should be given to the campers' families? Other families in the living unit? Staff?
- What exactly are your supervision expectations for staff? How will you communicate and maintain these expectations? How are staff held accountable?

Staff Training

- Are staff trained to prioritize safety and to be actively supervising?
- Are staff trained on setting consistent limits?
- Are your staff trained to work with campers to set boundaries and behavioral expectations with them?
- How are staff trained regarding active supervision in nonstructured times?
- How are staff trained related to supervision and respecting personal space (e.g., shower times, bathroom, sleeping quarters)?
- Are staff trained on documentation of incidents of camper misconduct?
- Are staff trained about their roles as mandated reporters?

Key Takeaway

Incidents can happen and no one is at fault. Policies can be good, staff can be trained and act accordingly, yet incidents can still happen.

Resources:

- [Preventing Peer-to-Peer Abuse: Supervision as a Line of Defense](#). *Camping Magazine*
- [Risk Management: Supervising the Young Supervisor](#). *Camping Magazine*
- [In the Care of Other People's Children, Part 3: Supervision Tips for Frontline Staff](#). *Camping Magazine*
- [Skills for First-Time Supervisors: Actively Grow into Your Supervisory Role](#). *Camping Magazine*
- [Child Abuse Prevention Resources](#). American Camp Association website
- [A Story of Peer-to-Peer Abuse and How to Prevent It](#). The Redwoods Group

#5 Gender Identities — What to Share and Who to Share With?

After the camp season, a camp director received a call from a concerned and upset parent that a nonbinary counselor had shared with a seven-year-old camper what nonbinary is. The parent felt the camp and counselor had overstepped and overshared.

The camp director had connected with the counselor in question before camp, and at the counselor's request they had agreed to deflect and defuse any questions that arose related to their gender identity. Upon hearing from the concerned parent, the camp director was confused as to why the counselor would go against their own request.

However, upon further inquiry, the camp director learned that it was in fact another counselor who had corrected and shared with the seven-year-old when the camper used incorrect pronouns in reference to the nonbinary counselor.

What can we learn from this case?

Policies and Risk Management

- What are the camp's mission, vision, and core values in supporting camper identity and authentic, humanistic inquiry?
- What are the camp's policies specific to diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- Does the camp communicate with the parents their core values and articulate how those values manifest in the staffing and camp curriculum?

- Does the camp provide sensitivity training on potentially sensitive topics and/or policies, and are staff fluent in discussing (or know when not to discuss) sensitive topics with campers?
- Has the camp established guidelines for when to communicate with parents when specific situations arise?

Staff Training

- Communicate the camp's core values, mission, and vision.
- Ensure all staff are included in any agreements regarding any sensitive topics, including late hires.
- Practice sensitive topic responses to campers, and be sure counselors understand and agree to preset boundaries.

Key Takeaway

Train all staff on sensitive conversations and be sure if an agreement is made regarding a specific sensitive topic that all counselors are aware. Consider sharing your sensitive issues policy with your parents and simultaneously clarifying the camp's mission, vision, and values.

Resources:

- [Camp Gender Support Plan — Gender Spectrum](#)
- [Framework for Gender Inclusive Camps — Gender Spectrum](#)
- [Gender Inclusion at Camp](#). *Camping Magazine*
- [What's the Impact of Gender-Inclusive Cabins on Campers' Friendships?](#)
- [Does Your Camp Reinforce, Resist, or Relieve Gender Stereotypes?](#) *Camping Magazine*
- [The Safe Zone Project](#)
- [Checklist for Gender Inclusive Practices at Camp](#)

#6 Co-Parenting and Homesickness Disagreement

An overnight camp director called with a question about parents with joint custody. A camper was very homesick and wasn't doing well at camp. The child had been at camp before and done well, but this year's camp sessions ran longer due to COVID. The camper made it through the first week of camp but started to display unsafe behaviors the second week, running away from the group and having trouble listening to the staff because they wanted to go home.

The camper's father had visitation during the camp session and signed his child up for camp. He wanted the camper to stay at camp. The camper's mother, however, offered to drive to camp to pick

them up. The father objected, saying he paid for camp and wanted the child to stay. The camp director was able to get the parents to talk to each other, though they did not come to an agreement.

The camp director offered to pro-rate the camp tuition and give the dad a refund, wanting everyone to feel good about the situation and for the camper to consider returning to camp in the future. The dad spoke with his child and let them know if they made it through camp that day, he would drive to camp the next day to pick them up.

The camp director wanted to know if the father didn't follow through and pick up the camper, could they release the camper to the mom? What if the father said not to release the camper to their mother, even though the mother shared custody? Are there legal issues with allowing the mom to pick up the camper? Are there legal issues with not releasing the camper to their mom?

What can we learn from this case?

Policies and Risk Management

- What is the camp's policy for releasing a camper? Who is eligible and what paperwork do they need to have on file with the camp?
- How will the camp respond if the mother shows up?
- Does the camp have legal counsel to answer the legal questions related to custody?
 - How does the camp determine which parent can legally pick up the child?
 - Are there local laws that guide decision-making around custody issues?

Staff Training

- Ensure staff know the camper release policies and are practiced at checking for required documents and understand procedures when there might be a custody issue.
- Train staff leadership on the laws related to custody in your local jurisdiction.

Key Takeaway

It is important to have policies and procedures set for campers who may not live with both parents for whom a specific custody arrangement is in place. Utilize legal counsel to develop policies and procedures (from enrollment paperwork to contacting parents and releasing campers) that provide the camp team with clear guidelines to deal with situations that may arise.

Resources:

- [Who Is in Charge? CampLine](#)
- [The Do's and Don'ts of Summertime Custody](#)

- [Summer Camp Sign-ups, Vacations, and Child Custody](#). *Divorce Mag*
- [Co-Parenting Through Summer Camp](#)

#7 Post-Camp Staff Suicide

A popular 19-year-old camp counselor died by suicide shortly after the summer camp season ended. The camp didn't know that the young staff person was struggling with depression, and the leadership was caught off-guard with the news of the death. The camp director, concerned about the staff and campers who — coming out of the pandemic — were not particularly resilient and might need mental health support themselves.

The director wanted assistance securing resources and training tools to identify behavior indicating the need for professional mental health for fellow staff and campers.

The director also requested support regarding how to respond to the camp community, the community at large, and potentially the media.

What can we learn from this case?

Policies and Risk Management

- Have you educated staff on the symptoms that signify the need for mental health support?
- Do you have an incidence response system to report potential mental health emergencies to the appropriate team members and mental health professionals?
- Consider establishing a mental health support network within your community to provide support to you and your team when needed.
- Do you have a crisis response toolkit for addressing your camp community, the larger community, and/or the media when the need arises?

Staff Training

- Discuss and train staff on ways to support colleagues and campers who display signs of mental stress, depression, and anxiety.
- Ensure staff know the resources that are available to them.
- Consider offering mental health first aid certification to your staff team.
- Train staff on the signs and symptoms of a mental health emergency and provide them with the steps to seek appropriate support.

Key Takeaway

Mental health has been a rising concern for the past several years. With the pandemic, mental health support needs have greatly increased. It is important for camp leaders to utilize mental health professionals to create a camp environment attuned to the needs of their campers and staff and to readily provide resources as needed.

Resources:

- [Suicide Prevention](#)
- [Mental Health Resources — Tips for Camps](#)
- [Crisis Communications Toolkit](#)

#8 To Share or Not to Share?

A camp called its local Child Protective Services (CPS) agency about a disclosure of abuse (at home) that a 13-year-old made while at camp. The camp wanted to know if ACA had a best practice about informing both parents in an equal/shared/joint custody situation — regardless of which parent enrolled the camper. The caller kept wanting to add/impose their own personal point of view about wanting to know what happens while the child is in the other parent's care.

We discussed that there is generally no legal requirement to tell parents that you have made a report concerning their child or to withhold that information (check your state's requirements). We also discussed that, in some circumstances, telling the parents before a CPS worker has met with the child might further endanger the child. In those cases, it's important not to discuss the report until the CPS worker has contacted the family.

What can we learn from this case?

Policies and Risk Management

- If someone from your camp makes a report to CPS, will you notify the parents?
- What is your camp's prevailing practice related to disclosure of information including incident/accident reports or calls to CPS?
- In the case of joint custody, does your camp share all things related to a camper's stay with both households? What if this was about lice, misbehavior, or homesickness?

Staff Training

- Are staff trained to know and follow the camp's policies regarding sharing information with parents?

Key Takeaway

Have clear parameters at camp for dealing with camper issues that arise with parents of campers that share custody.

Resources:

- [Child Abuse Reporting](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions from Mandated Reporters](#)
- [Peer-to-Peer Child Sexual Abuse Risk: Protecting Children from Other Children](#) by Gregory Love and Kimberlee Norris

Wrapping Up: Preparing for Crisis at Your Camp

Camp is a place full of the unexpected, and, as we can see in these case studies, the unexpected can include situations that are difficult and frightening. We hear hundreds of stories from camp professionals each year about the crises they face, and no crisis is too big or too small to justify a call to the ACA Camp Crisis Hotline. Some situations might be preventable through regular and systematic emergency action planning; others simply are not. But all are important opportunities for learning, both at your camp and as a community of camp professionals. We hope the cases and prompts covered here serve as a starting point for dialogue and critical examination of your policies, practices, and staff training.

A few things to remember about the ACA Camp Crisis Hotline:

- It is available to any camp professional experiencing what they feel is a crisis situation, regardless of ACA membership or accreditation status.
- It is free and confidential, available around the clock, 365 days a year.
- It is staffed by ACA staff members with experience working at camp but who are not legal or medical experts.
- Our most shared resources are available at ACAamps.org/resource-library/camp-crisis-hotline.
- Call us at 800-573-9019.

Foundations to Crisis Preparedness

While each case is unique, we find ourselves asking callers to the crisis hotline a similar set of questions. The following recommendations are based on these questions, and we believe

they are foundational to being able to prevent and/or handle a crisis or unexpected situation. These are essential parts of your tool kit. Most importantly, identify where your gaps are. What information or policy is missing or weak if you had to manage one of these cases at your camp?

Develop a working relationship with your insurance company and representative.

Our callers are sometimes worried their rates will go up, or they are just going to talk to some person who processes claims and can't help. It's so important to understand the limits and coverage afforded to you by your camp. For example, we have been hearing stories of parents requesting the official copies of incident reports. Some insurance companies have a philosophy to share and create a partnership with those families, and some insurance companies will tell you under no circumstances should you share this information.

Ensure access to legal counsel.

Consider it an investment. Just like you want to find the right kind of medical professional for specific types of treatments, you need to find the right attorneys too! A great place to start is your insurance company.

Ensure access to mental health professionals.

Develop a relationship with a network of mental health professionals such as social workers, counselors, therapist, someone who specializes in grief, etc. Ideally these relationships can be on call, but we are also hearing great success from camps who have volunteers or hires in this field supporting them through training in the summer, a couple days a session, and as needed.

Develop a comprehensive crisis communication plan.

In the event of serious accident, incident, injury, or even an infestation, an excellent communication plan is critical. A well-prepared camp has key messages for a variety of audiences (parents, media, staff, board, etc.) for a number of possible scenarios common in camp. You can prewrite messages for almost anything you could imagine happening at camp, so that should the need arise, you only have minor edits and details to add, and you'll expend much less energy.

Review and train to your supervision polices.

Attentive, active, and engaged staff supervision is critical in decreasing camper behavior issues and ensuring a healthy and safe camp community. Create a plan for routine observation to provide feedback to staff on remaining vigilant and accountable. Train for problem-solving around scenarios in which supervision may be challenging.