

# CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT



## Crisis Communications

Unfortunately, a crisis can occur at any time, affecting any camp at any location. It is for that reason that you should prepare for a crisis before it happens.

Communicating effectively during a crisis is critical. To help all camps prepare in the event of a crisis, we've developed this toolkit to help guide you in your communications. This should not serve as a substitute for the **ACA Camp Crisis Hotline** but rather should help you understand the components of a good crisis communications plan.

### Crisis Communications Overview

1. Preparing for a Crisis
  - a) Develop a crisis communications plan. The plan will help guide you through a crisis and help you stay on course during an emergency.
  - b) Establish protocol. It's important to identify a list of key personnel to contact in the event of a crisis. Keep phone numbers, pagers, etc. available for the primary contacts.
  - c) Know the [ACA Camp Crisis Hotline](#) number. Calls to the hotline are confidential. The Hotline staff can help you by talking through your crisis and helping you to identify options. The Hotline is available 24 hours a day, year-round at 800-573-9019.
  - d) Identify your target audience(s). During a crisis, it's important to identify to whom you are speaking. Most often you are communicating with staffers, children, and parents. Remember the media serves as a gatekeeper to other external audiences.
2. Identifying a Crisis
  - a) It's important to identify the crisis and understand its origins. Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself:
    - i. Did the crisis take place at camp?
    - ii. Did the crisis take place outside of camp but involve camp staff, camper(s), or camp families?
    - iii. Is the crisis immediate or ongoing?
    - iv. Is the crisis one that will remain local or will it have national media appeal?
    - v. Is this something that you can ask your Section Executive to help resolve for your camp or is it something that requires national office assistance.
    - vi. Does the crisis concern a media hot button issue—an allegation of child abuse, outraged parents, and accreditation? If so, is this an issue best handled by a national spokesperson?
3. Handling a Crisis
  - a. When a crisis occurs, it's important to gather the facts immediately. In gathering the facts you should talk with camp staff only.
  - b. Remind the camp to follow these suggestions in handling their crisis. Tell them that they can find online assistance at \_\_\_\_\_.
  - c. If the crisis is at a camp, the camp should designate one spokesperson to speak on behalf of the camp. Ideally this is the camp director, camp owner, or other person of authority. It is best to identify only one spokesperson to ensure a consistency in message. However, the

- camp may ask you to act as the spokesperson—if you feel comfortable to do this. Or the camp may need help from ACA's national office.
- d. Remind the camp that your help, the assistance of ACA's national office, and the online Communications Toolkit are not a substitute for the help and advice from their own attorney or PR counsel.
  - e. If the crisis requires statements from you, control the flow of information. In other words, if the media calls, be courteous, take their information, and ask the deadline to return the call. You do not need to provide an immediate comment to the media but you should not ignore their requests either.
  - f. Develop a written statement. You should work with your attorneys and/or your PR counsel to develop a written statement to share with parents and the media. The statement should include the facts only. Do not speculate and do not place blame. ACA [local office staff](#) or the ACA [national office](#) can provide assistance as well.
  - g. Develop key messages. This should be for your internal use only to help you in discussing the matter with parents and the media.
  - h. Communicate the message and the facts. Provide the media with the written statement and be available for comment. Remember to stick to the facts. Do not try to "hide" bad news as negative media coverage is likely to result and will continue beyond the immediate crisis itself.
  - i. Keep track of all calls and requests. Keep a list of reporters with whom you spoke.
  - j. Respond to the media. Remember the media helps to shape public opinion. A "no comment" statement is seen as an admittance of guilt. Be fair and respond quickly to the media.
  - k. If you are not available by phone or cell phone at all times (during normal business hours), please consider leaving a voice message that directs the media to the national office—"If this is a media inquiry and you need immediate assistance or if this is an emergency, please call the American Camp Association national office at 317-342-8456 and ask for the public relations department"
  - l. The media may ask to speak with other persons affected by the crisis. It is best to restrict access and to refer all questions to the primary spokesperson.
  - m. Keep track of all media coverage. Review all the media coverage for accuracy. Call the reporter when the information is not accurate

**In Summary:**

- Designate a crisis communications protocol.
- Manage the message and the media.
- Understand and prioritize your audience.
- Communicate early and often.
- Do not lie.
- Do not ignore the situation.

## Sample Crisis Press Statement

This statement is a sample used by ACA during an actual media crises. It is an example—and can be helpful as you develop your own statements and key messages. If you need additional assistance, contact the national office public relations office. The statement is not intended to substitute advice from your attorney or insurance representative.

### **Statement 1: Relating to the death of a young camper from rabies. Although the boy did attend camp, the CDC found his death was not linked to the camp.**

Our hearts are broken by the loss of this child, and our condolences go out to the parents and extended family of this little boy. He was an outstanding young man and a great camper. This is a great loss for his family and for our camp family.

Here at XXXX Camp, we are accredited by and follow the health procedures of the American Camp Association, and we keep detailed health records as required by ACA. We have combed these records and talked with our staff and find no evidence of any reports from campers or staff that this child received any kind of bite while at camp or on any of our trips this summer. The health and safety of our campers is our first and foremost concern.

We have been in touch with the family and with The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. The CDC had representatives from their Rabies Division studying this case. I spoke with the CDC this morning, and they do not feel that this camper contracted rabies while he was at camp this summer. I would suggest that you contact the CDC concerning their findings and recommendations. We continue to cooperate fully with all authorities in this heart-breaking situation. The CDC phone number is XXX+XXX-XXXX.

## Sample Crisis Talking Points

### **Key messages relating to a car accident in XXXX. The camp was not an ACA-accredited camp.**

#### **Key Message #1**

Camp XXX is deeply saddened by any tragedy that affects a family. ACA offers its deepest condolences to the family members.

#### **Key Message #2**

We cannot speculate on what happened; The XXXX Camp in XXXX is not an accredited camp.

#### **Key Message #3**

The safety of individuals at camp is all camp professionals' number one priority. Over 11 million children and adults attend camp each year, many of them attend the over 2,400 ACA-accredited camps nationwide. ACA is the only national association that accredits all types of camps, based upon 290 national standards for health and safety. The American Camp Association has nearly a century of experience as a national community of camp professionals, dedicated to enriching the lives of children and adults through the camp experience.

- ACA accreditation indicates that a camp has voluntarily allowed its practices to be compared with standards established by professionals in the camp industry.

- American Camp Association standards are recognized by courts of law and government regulators as the standards of the camp industry.

## **Key Messages Relating to a Boating Accident**

### **Key Message #1**

The American Camp Association is deeply saddened when we learn of any injury that occurs at camp.

### **Key Message #2**

The American Camp Association has developed professional standards to be followed by ACA-accredited camps. Safety is at the core of ACA's accreditation system, and safety of campers and staff is paramount within ACA-accredited camps. Aquatic activities at camp require certified, trained staff in appropriate ratios, skill testing, safety systems, rescue equipment, rehearsed emergency procedures, and other guidelines to reinforce risk management and safety during water sports.

### **Staff training**

- ACA standards recommend that camps implement a system to provide each camp staff member, prior to assuming job responsibilities, training that is specific to his or her individual job functions, including clear expectations for acceptable job performance.
- All boating activities in day and resident camps must have an appropriately certified person on duty with rescue skills appropriate to the activity and the aquatic location.
- Camps should supply written evidence that all operators and drivers are provided training prior to use of motor boats.

### **Key Message #3**

XXX Camp is an ACA-accredited camp and has voluntarily undergone a rigorous risk management process to prevent illness or injury to campers and is required by ACA standards to have written emergency procedures in effect for crisis situations. XXX Camp offered immediate response time when administering first aid. XXX Camp had an attending physician address all campers about the incident, debrief them, and determine whether further consultation was needed.

## **Key messages regarding an allegation of child abuse by male counselor at Camp XXXX. The alleged victim is an 11-year-old boy.**

### **Key Message #1**

Camp XXXX is committed to collaborative efforts that can reduce the abuse of children. As an ACA-accredited camp, we work with licensing boards, regulatory bodies, and developers of camp standards to continue to seek ways to promote safety.

### **Key Message #2**

We acknowledge that no state licensing program and no set of regulations or laws can guarantee an accident-free environment; thus, we strive to compliment such programs with sound risk management training and ongoing program assessment and improvement.

- Staff screening standards include the use of application forms, reference checks, personal interviews, work history reviews, and background checks.
- Staff training standards include educating camp staff on the recognition, prevention and reporting method for child abuse; age-appropriate behavior management techniques to help create a

physically and emotionally safe environment; supervision of campers; safety considerations; emergency procedures; and more.

- Staff and camper supervision standards recommend observation of all staff while on duty, training for supervisors, and specific performance guidelines.

### **Key Message #3**

The cumulative effects of ACA's child protection standards are more reliable and practical than the varied state-to-state criminal background checks, which are only one facet of a comprehensive staff screening process. This more comprehensive approach to screening is recommended by the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and the report of the American Bar Association's Center on Children and the Law.

## **Key Messages Regarding the Death of a Camper**

### **Key Message #1**

Camp XXXX is deeply saddened when we learn of any tragedy that affects the life of a child. We extend our deepest regret and concern for the family members.

### **Key Message #2**

Camp XXXX is an ACA-accredited camp and has voluntarily undergone a rigorous risk management process and is required by ACA standards to have written emergency procedures in effect for crisis situations. [Leave out if camp is not accredited]

- We are continuing to cooperate with authorities pertaining to this matter.
- We do not have all the details at this time since authorities are still in the midst of investigating the situation.

## **Crisis Communication Questions**

Following a death/accident/abuse allegation, media questions are often pointed and difficult to field. Listed below are some of the common questions and general responses that can be tailored to address individual situations. As always, utilize proven key messages and the resources available within ACA for help.

### **Is the camp accredited?**

Yes (or no) Camp \_\_\_ is (or is not) an ACA-accredited camp. You can find the current listing of ACA accredited camps on ACA's Web site at [www.ACAcamps.org](http://www.ACAcamps.org). [We do not provide this information unless directly asked.]

### **Will you (ACA) investigate?**

We are an educational organization. State authorities have not granted us authority to investigate, gather testimony, secure confidential reports, or subpoena confidential records. We rely on officials with such authority to conduct investigations. ACA is always deeply saddened when we learn of any tragedy or allegation of wrongdoing that affects the life of a child. We are committed to finding new ways to educate camp staff on best practices, safety, standards, and risk management within the camp community.

**Will you (ACA) remove accreditation?**

Accreditation is normally granted or removed based on results of a full accreditation visit and verified compliance with accreditation criteria. This includes compliance with up to 300 health and safety standards covering health, safety, and program issues. When those authorized under state law to conduct investigations have completed their work, a re-accreditation visit may or may not be warranted. Accreditation is not automatically removed from a camp based on an accident or injury. No accreditation process, no licensing program, no set of regulations or laws can guarantee safety. However, accreditation can be withdrawn from a camp if ACA is notified by appropriate authorities that laws which significantly affect the health and safety of campers or staff have been violated

**Was accreditation ever removed from this/a camp?**

Official records of a camp's accreditation history are maintained at our national office. We do not maintain that record. You may contact the standards department at the national office. Camps can lose accreditation for other reasons, such as for non-payment of fees or for failure to get an accreditation visit in the required cycle. So, that information alone may not be helpful. ACA has, however, removed accreditation from camps for significant health and safety violations. Therefore, though not a guarantee, current ACA accreditation is still the best evidence of a camp's commitment to providing a safe and nurturing environment for children.

**Are there complaints against this/a camp?**

ACA has a process for complaint resolution on issues about camps. This process focuses on finding resolution. The details of complaints are not available as a public record. However, violations of ACA's Code of Ethics may result in penalties for the camp, including removal of accreditation. [View Complaint Resolution Process Manual](#).

**What is your standard for \_\_\_\_?**

A brief summary of all the requirements of ACA standards can be found on ACA's Web site. Answers to some of the frequently asked questions about standards can be found at [www.ACAcamps.org/funsafety](http://www.ACAcamps.org/funsafety).

**Should this have happened?**

All institutions in our world – churches, schools, youth programs, camps, families – recognize that no one has an impenetrable safety net from the ills of society or from harm. ACA training and guidelines are designed to educate camps to take all reasonable precautions to provide an environment that makes safety for children the top priority.

**Has this happened before? How common are drownings in camps? Abuse, fires, etc?**

Because “camp” is defined by society very broadly, we do not have specific data on crisis situations in the industry at large. Within ACA, we hear of few such incidents each year. But any tragedy that affects the life of a child is a concern for those of us devoted to the well-being of children through safe and positive camp experiences.

**Are background checks required for staff in camps? What about for international staff?**

Criminal background checks are just one piece of ACA's comprehensive approach to evaluating the background of applicants and their acceptability to work with youth. Our standards also require

reference checks, personal interviews, and work history reviews. The screening requirements, along with strong training and supervision guidelines, combine to provide a comprehensive approach to child protection.

The screening and training requirements for international staff are no different than those for U.S. staff. International placement agencies, familiar with the resources and agencies in the countries from which international staff come, help with the initial application and screening steps.

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