

Protecting Your Child Against Sexual Abuse During the Summer - Are You Ready?

*The Massachusetts Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Task Force*¹



As we get our children ready for their summer activities, we know we need to pack certain items for their safety: the bug spray to guard against mosquitoes and other pests, sunscreen to protect against burning, water bottles and snacks to keep them hydrated and fed, and maybe a few band aids for those inevitable bumps and bruises. We think automatically about these things because we want to protect our kids and keep them safe from harm. But, we also need to think about other things that could potentially harm them - other people.

The reality of sexual assault against children is all too real. Almost any day of the week, it seems that the news contains some report about children being sexually abused or exploited - often by the very people who are supposed to be protecting them. Like you, we want all our children to be protected against this possibility and, in addition to suggesting that you find time to talk to your children about personal safety,² offer the following thoughts and suggestions for you to consider as you plan their summer programs.

Overnight camp, day camp, sports camp, music camp, math camp, trip and travel programs and many other camp and summer activities are right around the corner, and offer wonderful experiences for children that can last a lifetime. Whether the camp or activity you're considering is public or private, school or university affiliated, part of

a city-sponsored offering of summer activities, or faith-based, NOW is a good time to ask program sponsors and administrators a few questions that will help to ensure your children will be safe in their care. Don't be shy. Parents have every right to raise questions about a variety of safety-related issues and responsibilities - and the administrators of programs that take child abuse prevention seriously should be ready (and more than happy) to answer them.

For example, although every state is different, camps and summer programs should be in compliance with state-specific criminal records checks and other screening requirements for existing staff, prior to hiring new staff, and for parents and volunteers - virtually anyone who will have direct and/or unmonitored access to children.

The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) has published an overview of camp rules and regulations developed by the Commonwealth. Go to mass.gov and search summer camp.

Camps and other youth-serving organizations should also screen existing and new staff and volunteers for sexual offenses, and make use of the national sex-offender registry, state criminal and sexual offender records offices, and police departments to check for sexual offenses before hire. The Massachusetts Sexual Offender Registry Board (SORB) has additional information on its website (mass.gov/sorb).



Use the sample checklist below, and an organization's ability to answer the questions it raises, to help you determine if a camp or summer program is ready and able to accept the responsibility of caring for your children:

- Is the program accredited, licensed, or certified by a government or private agency?*^{3,4}
- Does the camp conduct background checks on all staff and volunteers for criminal (CORI) and sexual offense history?*
- Are there published rules about staff being alone with children?*
- What is the ratio of counselors to campers? (Recommendations from the American Camp Association can be found on their website.)*
- Are there guidelines outlining acceptable conduct between staff and children, and between the children themselves?*
- Are all staff and volunteers trained in child sexual abuse prevention, recognition, and reporting responsibilities?*
- Are children always supervised?*
- Who does my child go to if he or she is uncomfortable with staff?*
- Are written policies and procedures about preventing child sexual abuse in place?*
- Will my child be able to communicate with me if necessary?*
- Are there regulations spelled out about private times (e.g. toileting, dressing, bathing)?*
- What are the sleeping arrangements?*
- How are staff supervised?*

No one enjoys talking about or reading about the sexual abuse of a child. But the number of children reported as victims each year compels all of us to be better informed about how it happens, how to recognize it, and, most important, how to prevent its occurrence. No environment is risk free. However, that risk can be lowered

by paying attention to the types of issues and questions outlined above.

Hopefully, these and other similar questions will help both camp and organization administrators and parents have an important conversation that reflects a mutual desire to keep children safe, not only during the summer, but always.

¹A statewide, multi-agency collaboration utilizing the collective experience of both public and private youth-serving agencies, offices and organizations to create new frameworks, guidance, and tools for the safety and protection of Massachusetts children and the prevention of child sexual abuse. For more information contact the Office of Child Advocate or the Children's Trust. childrenstrustma.org

²Stop it Now offers a tip sheet on talking to children and teens about sexual abuse: stopitnow.org/ohc-content/tip-sheet-8

³Accreditation by the American Camp Association involves a voluntary review of up to 300 national standards for health and safety, which are considered the best practices of the profession. See: acanewengland.org

⁴The American Camp Association New England has a searchable database of 9,000 accredited U.S. camps and summer programs: acanewengland.org/families-public/finding-your-camp