

What Makes a Camp or Youth Facility Great?

Your camp or youth facility can positively influence a child's life forever. After inspecting over 800 youth facilities throughout the country over the past several years, there are some common elements that differentiate great programs from good programs and "disasters waiting to happen."

Staff Attitudes are Crucial

Safety always involves staff and counselors. Although staff-to-child ratios are important, staffers' attitudes are critical to a program's success. These attitudes are a direct reflection of how well the director has communicated the program's mission.

Safety Test: Ask three different staffers the following questions. If you receive similar answers, your training program is right on target.

- What's our mission? What do we want to accomplish with the kids?
- What are three of the director's greatest safety concerns?

Staff Must be Willing to Intervene

A counselor or staff member's proximity to kids and willingness to intervene when a problem occurs is more important than increased numbers of inattentive counselors or staffers.

Safety Test: During staff training, get up on a sturdy table and ask staffers how they would get you down if you were a child. The usual responses are:

- The staffer stands back and tells you to get down from the table. (This response can lead to bruised or broken ankles as kids jump off the table.)
- The staffer approaches you, extends a hand, and says "let me help you down from the table." This is the much better response because it reflects staff proximity to the intervention.

All Staff Take Pride in the Facility

When directors and staff take pride in their program, it shows. The opposite is true, too. Whenever staffers or administrators communicate through word or action the message, "I don't care" to a child, parent, or even other staffers, there is probably a serious liability problem. If a child tells a staffer, "I don't feel well" or "so-and-so keeps hitting me" or "there's something icky in the pool," the staffer must respond immediately and appropriately, and seek medical, administrative, or parental help as needed.

Safety Test: Do staffers and administrators routinely pick up and throw away litter? This type of attention to detail is a good indicator that all staff members take pride in the facility.

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Staff Must be Held Accountable—and Administrators Must be Willing to Act

Staff must be held to clearly communicated behavior standards. During a recent camp tour, one lifeguard was half asleep in the chair and appeared hung over. The camp director's response was critical. After two minutes of conversation with the lifeguard, the director closed the pool and fired the lifeguard on the spot. If he had said, "I'll address this problem after we finish our tour," Markel's response would have been to immediately cancel the policy, or at least non-renew.

Safety Test: Include this question on mid-summer and end-of-summer staff evaluations: "Did staff members successfully demonstrate healthy practices and maintain their personal health through the summer?" This question can include practices such as washing hands, getting enough sleep, and following their doctor's orders to recover from an injury or illness. Telling the staff at the beginning of the summer that they will be evaluated on health behaviors may significantly reduce the number of Workers' Compensation claims filed.

Security Training is Essential

Never allow visitors, including parents, to wander around your facility unescorted. Train staff to immediately stop visitors and ask, "Who are you? Let me escort you to the office." Staff should never assume that a stranger is authorized to be on your property, or that someone else has already cleared the person to access your facility.

Safety Test: A couple times during the summer, recruit a stranger to test staff responses to unescorted visitors.

Get Buy-In for Your Safety Program

Directors who can get their staff to buy into the safety program are much more likely to have an enjoyable summer and fewer injuries. They'll also have more time to do fun things, rather than talking to plaintiff's attorneys and insurance claims managers. A successful safety program is also likely to lead to successful accomplishment of your facility's mission.

If you have a safety or risk management question or a suggestion for a topic, please contact Markel's Risk Management Department at safety1st@markelcorp.com.