

**Preventing and Addressing Violence at Camp**

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It is hard to believe that another summer is well under way and campers are having what we hope will be a safe and happy summer for all. For many, however, in light of the recent school shootings, the safety of our children wherever they are has been on our minds. Most recently in Oregon, a 15-year-old freshman brought two guns and a knife into school and killed another classmate. This shooting, the second school shooting in that week, was the latest in a list of attacks nationwide. In the past 18 months, since the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT, there have been more than 70 school shootings. This statistic is horrific and alarming. Schools are working diligently to improve security measures to make schools safer for students. What about camps and the safety implications there? What thoughts come to mind when we consider safety at camp?

For one thing, we need to be aware and prepared to address the probable increase in anxiety and concerns that parents may have in sending their children away to camp. For instance, they may have increased concerns about their children's safety. We need to be patient and prepared to be reassuring and ready to acknowledge their fears and do the best we can to assure them that precautions are being taken to ensure safety. In order to do this it may be helpful to keep the following suggestions in mind, which, while intended for schools, can be equally useful for camps.

First, we need to understand that although our image may be of a gothic teen dressed in black, there is no one profile to fit a school shooter. One of the most frightening things to consider then is who is capable of committing such a violent crime. While many young people may have the capacity to bully or tease, who among them have the capacity to kill? Research documents that these shooters have psychopathic and narcissistic personality traits. They lack empathy, lack a conscience, lack remorse and often engage in sadistic behaviors. This may involve cruelty to animals and a fascination with weapons. They are generally not the bully but those who have been bullied themselves. They often have chronic feelings of isolation and angry outbursts are not uncommon. A history of substance abuse often fits the profile as well. They look to attract attention and often give off these kinds of warning signs. As a result, it is imperative to keep alert for signals of such behavior. For example, if a socially more withdrawn camper who is often the target of some teasing draws a violent picture in arts and crafts, a red flag needs to go up and the situation looked into more closely. As well, an angry camper who makes threatening

statements about "getting those campers in Bunk 10 who have made my summers miserable" needs to be taken seriously and evaluated.

It is critical to listen to ALL threats and take them seriously. Not every threat poses the same risk for danger and most are not carried out, but each one needs attention and assessment. Threats must be assessed in a timely manner and decisions made quickly on how to handle them. Threats can be in the form of verbal statements, fantasies of destruction, revenge portrayed in writing, drawings or other activities. Ask questions. Is the camper depressed? Is he or she being bullied? Advise parents that if they want to keep camp a safe place for all they need to be truthful when filling out camp forms prior to camp and share information during the summer. Parents need to be made aware of the importance in sharing psychological issues and concerns so that the camp is prepared to assess the campers' needs and make accurate determinations of the safety of the camper and the camp in general. Have a plan in place for counselors and staff regarding what to do if they are concerned about a camper, hear or see something and the chain of commands to go through. Campers need to be aware of their responsibility in sharing things they observe that are concerning or are told by other campers and advised that they are not helping their friend or other camper by protecting a secret of that nature and could be seriously jeopardizing the safety of the camp.

Above all, camps need to have a No Violence Policy. Any act of violence should be taken seriously and may involve a camper being sent home. In addition, parents should be encouraged to have their child evaluated and, if recommended, to secure counseling.

\*Gwenn is a licensed social worker with almost 30 years experience working with children and adolescents. She has a Bachelor of Social Work from Cornell and a Master of Social Work from Columbia. She has been on staff at Schneider's Children's Hospital on Long Island and maintains a private practice as well. Gwenn was a camper for many years, and stayed on as both a counselor and group leader.

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