

Summer Camp Preparation

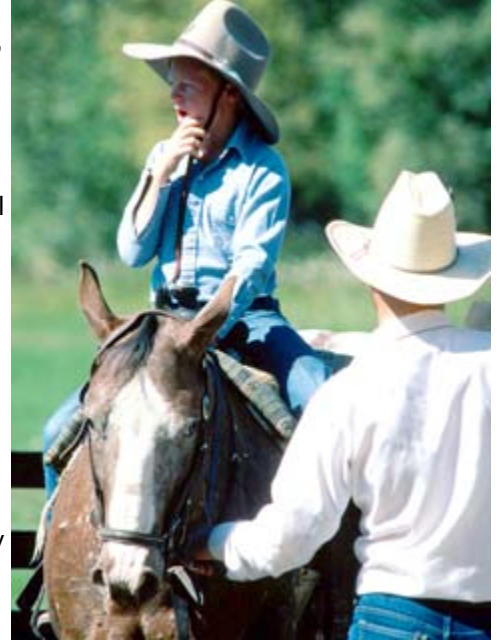
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Last year my older son went to sleep-away camp for the first time. Not only was that a brand new experience for our family, our son was one of the younger campers at the grounds, too. All together, it turned out to be a terrific experience of growth and maturity for him, never mind a ton of fun.

However, getting our son ready for camp both last summer and again this summer has made me think afresh about my years of writing about and teaching child protection initiatives. Not only did I want him to be as safe as possible, of course, I also wanted to be able to eliminate any concern of sexual abuse from my otherwise long, long list of mommy-anxieties about sleep-away camp. If you know a child who is going to camp this summer, perhaps the steps we have taken with our son are useful to you.

Review the camp thoroughly. How well do you know the camp program to which you are sending your child? Have you spoken with both alumni campers and current staff? Many times, parents not only do an excellent job assessing what will be fun and what will be physically safe, but also make assumptions about sexual protection. In a setting that is intimate by definition, there are questions that must be answered. For example, do you know how the camp screens workers? In particular, do they screen for possible sexual predators by running criminal background searches? Getting references that speak specifically to staffers who work with children? What problems, if any, have they had in the past? How were they handled?



In addition, make sure you ask specific questions about how the camp would respond to a child's complaint about a counselor or another camper. Who acts as an ombudsman? Under what circumstances are the parents contacted?

Identify a safe adult at camp—To keep your child safe, you must help identify his or her own resources, as well. Have you learned enough about the camp to know who your child could go to if he or she was worried about something that had happened? For example, at our son's camp, we learned that the camp "infirmary" was staffed by parent doctors and parent nurses who volunteered a week of their time in exchange for camp enrollment for their own kids.

While we can't predict everything, of course, these folks seemed like a reasonable resource for our son: likely compassionate, surely well-versed in talking with kids, and relatively disinterested in the camp structure. Plus, we knew our son has a good, open relationship with our doctor at home—he trusts and respects the doctor a lot. Thus, we told our son that if there was anything he was unhappy about that he didn't want to or couldn't discuss with the counselor, he should go to the infirmary. I am glad that we had identified that outlet for him even though no visits were necessary.

Check in, no matter what—The camp where our son attends is one of the many that touts an immersion culture in which the kids don't talk with the parents until the very end. We were told we could write to our child (we did every day) and look at his picture on the website (we did every day), but that he would tell us all about it when and only when we picked him up.

I didn't buy it. On day three, I called the main number and simply asked for a status report on my kid from the counselor. Later that day, the director called me back with a short report: a few details that added up to all was good. For me, checking in with the camp served two important roles. First, if something was wrong, of course, I wanted to know. But even more than that, I wanted the counselor and director to know that I was paying attention. Extra attention. More-than-even-allowed attention. Don't-mess-with-my-kid attention.

Discuss sexual abuse and protection with your child. Of course, your child should be well-versed in the basics of sexual abuse prevention before he or she heads off to camp. After all, at camp, your child will share close proximity to a group of relative strangers at the most personal of times: bathing, sleeping, etc. More than likely, you have laid a great foundation already, but make sure your child can answer the following:

- Does your child know that his or her private parts are private? Even in a group shower or changing facility, does your child know that no one should touch his or her private parts?
- And no one should ask your child to touch theirs? You might want to talk to your child about what kind of practices might be in order during these times.
- Can your child determine the reasonable boundaries for privacy? For example, no one should get in your child's bunk after lights-out.
- Does your child know that they can talk to you about anything—even if someone older said it was a secret? Let your child know that nothing bad will happen to them—or to you—if they talk to you about something that made them uncomfortable at camp.

Our son's sleep-away camp experience has certainly been a lot more than safe; it has been simply wonderful. I do wish the same for your child. And for you, I wish the calming power of knowing you have prepared your child for camp in every possible way.

Why investigate incidents, concerns, and allegations?

By The VIRTUS Programs



The mission of the Church is ministry. The “Church” is not a building or an organization. It is the people of God coming together as a community.

Any organization built around people can one day expect a report of an incident, concern, or an allegation of wrongdoing. When that happens, it is essential to conduct or commission an effective investigation.

One of the challenges for the Church is possessing fundamental characteristics that increase its vulnerability. The Church's foundation is one of trust. Even when the behavior of clergy, school personnel, staff, or volunteers is questioned, Church leaders may be inclined to blindly trust rather than question the motives or behavior of employees.

For the Church's resolution of a violation or complaint to be credible and defensible, it must be based on accurate fact gathering.

If the complaint alleges sexual misconduct, it is a challenge for the Church to balance canon law requirements with civil law demands for an objective, fair investigation. The criteria of fairness and objectivity are critical to dispelling the public perception that the Church is more concerned with clergy than victims.

Canon law imposes some restrictions that test the Church's ability to demonstrate objectivity during an investigation.

If considering an investigation, it is important to understand the following:

- In spite of your best efforts, wrongdoing sometimes happens.
- Credible, objective, fair investigations require certain skills and techniques.
- Everyone involved in the investigation should know what to expect.

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- An objective, quality investigation can minimize Church liability and substantially reduce the risk of litigation.
 - An objective, fair investigation balances the needs of the Church with complainant's rights.
 - Canon law imposes certain restrictions on investigations of allegations against clergy.
 - An objective and fair investigation benefits everyone involved.
 - Investigations of allegations of ongoing child sexual abuse *must* be immediately referred to civil authorities.

There are many benefits of prompt, thorough, fair, and objective investigations. Through the investigation process the Church, community, or organization can:

- Investigate reports of incidents and concerns and correct risky situations before concerns become allegations.
- Monitor compliance and evaluate the effectiveness of the organization's policies and procedures.
- Monitor compliance with federal, state, and local law.
- Demonstrate a commitment to fairness, mercy, and justice for everyone involved.
- Evaluate awareness, training, and education programs.
- Evaluate reporting mechanisms.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of prevention programs.
- Minimize gossip and tension.
- Minimize the risk of legal action as well as the financial and non-financial costs of defending a lawsuit against the Church and its clergy, staff, or volunteers.
- Investigation minimizes the risk of wrongful termination or discipline.
- The Church can make a sound response to complaints and allegations of wrongdoing.
- The organization can fulfill its legal duty to investigate and, in so doing, reduce the likelihood of expensive and time-consuming litigation.
- A prompt response to clergy, staff, and volunteer concerns enhances morale and productivity.

In addition to the obvious objectives of gathering the facts and resolving the complaint, in a way that supports all involved, a quality investigation can prevent litigation. By working diligently to gather the information and resolve the matter at the earliest possible moment, the Church achieves all of its objectives.

News from the VIRTUS® Programs

—Fifth Annual Conference for VIRTUS® Program Coordinators—

The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc., will host our *Fifth Annual Conference for VIRTUS Program Coordinators*, on August 28 and 29, 2008 at the Embassy Suites Hotel, Downtown Lakefront in Chicago, just two blocks from the popular Navy Pier. This conference is a convenient way to meet other coordinators, discuss common problems and their solutions, learn the latest news regarding improvements to the program, and experience the power of communication.



Our slate of conference topics will include:

- A presentation on how to maximize the continued use and value of the VIRTUS *Online*[™] system.
- An update on the outlook of the programs, including a preview of new resources.
- SWOT Analysis, a strategic planning tool to evaluate strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the VIRTUS Programs.
- Plus, we will discuss compliance with the *Charter* and *Norms*, the next round of USCCB audits, the power of communication, and more.

— The VIRTUS Protecting God’s Children[®] Online Awareness Module—

A new module has been developed to assist dioceses in their continued training and awareness to prevent child sexual abuse. The VIRTUS Protecting God’s Children Online Awareness Module is available to (arch)dioceses through VIRTUS *Online*. This online awareness module is an update to the two modules:

- Protecting God’s Children – Part I: Awareness; and
- Protecting God’s Children – Part II: Communication and Timely Response.

The online awareness module is comparable to the PGCA program, so it is a highly effective tool to implement as a review of the initial live session.

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