

Coping with the Death of a Camper

It's hard to imagine a more tragic or difficult event at camp than the death of a camper. Because of the expertise and attentiveness of camping professionals at all levels, these tragedies are rare. However, planning for the unthinkable will help you and your camp community cope with the tremendous emotional and professional sequelae, should a camper die. Camps, campers, parents, staff, and camp directors survive the death of a camper by grieving, learning, and supporting one another in a healthy, loving manner.

BEFORE A DEATH

Prevention

- ❑ Carefully hire and train staff.
 - Verify backgrounds (e.g., three references, required criminal background checks).
 - Verify skills sets (e.g., lifeguarding on *your* waterfront, use of *your* AED).
 - Conduct detailed interviews, preferably in-person.
- ❑ Have your camp nurse or doctor carefully review all medical records or health forms.
 - Conduct this review prior to campers' arrival, for all medical forms on file.
 - For late-arriving medical forms, review them the very same day campers arrive.
 - Do not allow campers to begin participation in your program without a medical form.
- ❑ Establish the safest possible rules for activities, following reasonable industry standards.
 - Ask yourself what another reasonable camp director would do.
 - Ask yourself what the industry best practice is.
 - Consult the ACA Accreditation Standards or call your section office for consultation.
- ❑ Review and practice emergency action plans.
 - Lost Bather Drill, Search & Rescue Protocol, Anaphylaxis, Crisis Response Plans
 - Practice, practice, practice so that everyone is comfortable and knows what to do.
 - Invite a consultant to conduct a safety audit of your facility in between accreditation visits.

Preparation

- ❑ Consult with insurer to design emergency communication plans.
 - Draft letters or e-mails or phone call scripts to parents.
 - Consider the establishment of additional phone lines or a "phone blast" service.
 - Design a protocol for communicating with the media. (See section below on "Communicating with Parents and the Media.")
 - Create a "Crisis Team" or "Caring Committee" for leadership after a death.
- ❑ Establish a support network of professionals.
 - Mental health professionals (for counseling, consultation, crisis plan design)
 - Trusted colleagues (for support, perspective, and assistance)
 - Consider a combination of local and non-local support.
- ❑ Understand and expect conceptual parts of tragedies:
 - the importance of flexibility in response
 - the dual role of a camp directors and staff as griever and grief counselor
 - the inevitable confusion and chaos despite careful planning

NOTES ON PREPARATION AT MY CAMP:



THE DEATH OF A CAMPER IS UNIQUE

- ❑ In addition to intense grief, the death of a child engenders an overwhelming sense of injustice—for the lost potential, unfulfilled dreams, and senseless suffering.
- ❑ The death occurs in a setting specifically designed to keep children safe—so feelings of insecurity among surviving children and families may increase.
- ❑ The death occurs under the supervision of surrogate caregivers, not parents—resulting in intense guilt among directors and staff, and intense helplessness among parents.
- ❑ As one director put it, “No director or staff member signs up for this experience, but it’s a risk you take when you walk out the door.”
- ❑ The camp community is strong and resilient, perhaps uniquely suited for healthy coping. There may be times when you or others feel that it’s just impossible to cope with the death of a camper, but you can. And your example of healthy coping is what your staff and campers need to follow.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER: CARE FOR THE DECEASED AND ESTABLISHING “TRACKS”

Caring for the Deceased

- ❑ The director must contact the child’s parents as soon as possible. This contact, typically a phone call, will be intense. Have a fact sheet and talking points in front of you. Emphasize how sorry you are, how much the child was loved, and what you will do next to support the family, such as facilitate their transportation and lodging as they travel to camp or the hospital.
- ❑ (At some point, there may also be a reporting obligation to the Department of Health. Check with your insurance agent and legal counsel to find out what your obligations might be.)
- ❑ Provide continuity of care from on-site first-aid until parents join their child at the hospital.
 - The director or a high-ranking staff member should be with the camper’s body at all times. Knowing someone is with their child is comforting to the family.
 - The camp representative who is with the child’s body provides a critical communication link to the camp and the family. Be sure this person has a cell phone and charger.
 - Consider being present with the body in shifts at the hospital if the parents’ travel time is lengthy.

Gather Your “Crisis Team” or “Caring Committee” and Establish “Tracks”

- ❑ This team, probably composed of the camp director, assistant director, camp nurse or doctor, and other senior staff members, must convene early to assign responsibilities.
 - One person, either the director or assistant director, should have the primary responsibility of contacting and being with the family and possibly talking with the media.
 - Another senior level person has the primary responsibility of running the camp and attending to campers’ and staff members’ needs.
 - A third person will be in charge of contacting all the other camper parents. First priority is to the parents of the other children in the deceased camper’s bunk, cabin, or group. Second priority is to the other children in the deceased camper’s unit. Third priority is to the other campers in camp. These contacts should be phone calls, rather than e-mails. A hard-copy letter can follow. Later on, you may also wish to send informational letters to campers from previous and subsequent sessions and even to alumni.
- ❑ See section below on “Communicating with Parents and the Media”
- ❑ Keep in mind that you are operating on three parallel tracks, each of which has its own “director:” (1) Working with the family; (2) Running the camp; (3) Communicating with Parents and the Media. Directors of these three parallel tracks must coordinate efforts, but also take responsibility for their track.



IMMEDIATELY AFTER: RUNNING CAMP AND CARING FOR CAMPERS

Establishing Safety for Survivors → Provide Stabilization

- ❑ Provide a safe environment.
 - Remove hazards or protect campers and staff from hazards.
 - Comfort witnesses and maintain a constant adult presence.
 - Alter future supervision of campers so they are not left alone.
- ❑ Provide information and reassurance.
 - Inform staff of news before campers because staff must then provide support.
 - Lack of information creates anxiety and may generate rumors. Be candid but not gory.
 - Accurate information begins a healing narrative. Provide it as you have it. Do not speculate about things you do not know for sure, such as cause of death.
 - Provide staff with “Helping Campers Cope with Loss” booklet for reference. This booklet is available for free on CampSpirit.com.
- ❑ Restore control and routine.
 - The activities of daily living must still be met (e.g., eating, talking, sleeping, playing). It is especially important to have ample water on hand.
 - Give choices within structure and be flexible to meet children’s needs.
 - Reassure campers about what has happened, who is in charge, what’s next.

STAGES OF HELPING THE COMMUNITY HEAL

Mourning & Remembrance, Stage 1 → Begin to Understand the Trauma

- ❑ Key: Connection with others.
- ❑ Expect and allow a wide range of grief reactions, including denial, numbness, shock, regressive behavior, bargaining, sadness, depression, anger, anxiety, guilt, remorse, and acceptance. If the camper who died was unpopular, expect some ambivalence about the death.
- ❑ *All of these reactions are normal and they do not happen in any predictable order. Repeat “However you feel right now and in the coming days is OK.”*
- ❑ Most people’s biggest need will be for information. They will wonder “*How did this happen?*” or “*How could this have happened?*” Providing factual information, when you have it, and when you have the family’s permission to share it, will help people understand and cope.
- ❑ Be aware that some campers and staff are at greater risk than others: (1) Those who directly witnessed the death, saw the body, or were involved in administering first aid; (2) Those who were personally close to the deceased; and (3) Those for whom this loss rekindles grief from a previous death of someone they were close to.
- ❑ Monitor the possibility of unhealthy coping, especially among your staff, including the use of alcohol or other drugs, overworking to avoid feelings, isolation, and blaming others. Some staff will not want to take scheduled time off, but it is important they do for two reasons: (1) They need to recharge their batteries; (2) This is part of reestablishing a normal routine.
- ❑ Begin mourning and remembrance in a multifaceted, flexible way.
 - Allow campers and staff to participate or not in activities, as they feel ready.
 - Consult with a mental health professional about remembrance activities, such as poems, flags at half-mast, vespers or other spiritual / religious services, murals.
 - Consult with a mental health professional about designing support groups that are appropriate to individual’s developmental level, proximity to the death, and needs.
- ❑ Strike a balance between activities focused on the deceased camper and regular activities, remembering that both kinds of activity can be healthy ways of coping with loss.



COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS AND THE MEDIA:

Basics of Communicating with Parents → Combine Reassurance with Coaching

- ❑ Inform other parents as soon as possible, given the circumstances. This builds trust.
 - Consult with your insurer and a mental health professional.
 - Provide ample opportunity for parents to contact you and their children.
- ❑ Allow enhanced communication with parents and peers. This gives opportunities for nurturance.
 - Additional time for journaling, writing letters, talking in groups.
 - Phone calls home where staff member speaks first and last with parents.
- ❑ Coach parents (and campers) to postpone hasty decisions about shortened stays.
 - The camp community is a healthy, healing community.
 - The ultimate goal is to return to a normal, joyful routine...at camp.
 - Allow for contact when parents insist (e.g., taking child out to lunch).

Basics of Communicating with Media → Protect privacy and limit coverage

- ❑ Consult immediately with your insurer and allow expert spokespeople to work with you.
- ❑ Opt for written statements over personal appearances.
- ❑ As a general principle, be forthcoming while protecting the privacy of all camper families.
- ❑ Protect the privacy of the camp, the staff, and the campers, by prohibiting access to property.
- ❑ Advise the deceased camper's parents of your media plan and provide assistance to them.
- ❑ Note that media and legal fallout from a camper's death may persist for months or longer.

The following four sections were written by my friend and associate Gary Kimball, Executive Director of the Camp-ALERT Network, an exclusive service of AMSkier Insurance. Gary and the AMSkier team have tremendous expertise assisting camps who have experienced the death of a camper or staff member. Contact Gary and his colleagues at 800-245-2666 or visit <http://www.amskier.com> to learn more.

Guidelines for Emergency Communications

Remember, when a tragic event occurs, communication inevitably follows. This may include media reports, parent phone calls, camper calls to parents, staff discussions with campers, and more. The media and parents are likely to learn the information on their own eventually, so it's always better to come forward first.

Prepare Before the Emergency

- Compile a list of local media, including phone, fax and email addresses so statements/news releases can be sent out quickly.
- Write a brief fact sheet for the media that contains basic information about the camp—number of campers, counselors, address, phone number, history, accreditation, name of director.
- Keep a phone log to record all incoming and outgoing calls related to the emergency.
- Prepare an emergency response checklist to ensure all necessary steps are followed.
- Have access to professional public relations/communications resources that can help you respond to the media and families.



Have One Spokesperson

- It is absolutely critical to identify one spokesperson for the camp in the event of an emergency and to define his/her specific responsibilities.
- The spokesperson should be the camp director or, at least someone who clearly represents the camp and is in a position to make decisions.
- The spokesperson should be able to devote the time required for communicating with the media. Be prepared to relieve this person of other administrative duties during an emergency.
- Clearly *define* what the spokesperson can and cannot say. Everything that the spokesperson says must be completely accurate; there can be no speculation.
- The spokesperson should work from a central camp location where fax, email and sufficient phone lines are available for all communication.
- Anyone who travels to an accident scene or hospital must be in contact with the spokesperson at all times.

Protect Your Property

- Immediately upon learning of a death, have someone assigned to the front gate; no media are permitted on camp property.
- The person assigned to the gate should treat media politely.

Four Steps to Communicating Effectively

(1) Evaluate the Situation

- Release information only when the facts are absolutely accurate and the camp's legal position is clear.
- Never speculate.
- When an emergency occurs, it is often difficult to sort out the facts and determine exactly what happened. That's why it is essential that an emergency preparation plan include a clear chain of command for gathering and communicating information.

(2) Plan Your Response

- When you have gathered all your information, you must plan your response, taking into account all of your audiences – campers, staff, families and the media.
- This planning process may take minutes, hours or days, so your communications plan may be implemented in stages as you learn more information.
- In most cases you will respond to media inquiries and not initiate the contact.
- In cases where it is clear that you will receive many media inquiries (death is related to an accident or crime), you can initiate communications by emailing/faxing a media statement to all local media.

(3) Communicate Quickly and Honestly

- It is absolutely essential to communicate the facts of an emergency quickly and honestly.
- A quick, accurate response will put the camp in control of these communications, help prevent miscommunications, build trust and make sure the camp's side of a story is told.
- Make sure all your communications with all your audiences are consistent.



(4) Evaluate Your Response

- Provisions should be made to monitor media broadcasts, family reaction and the actions of the authorities to make sure your response is appropriate and effective.
- Adjust your communications to meet new circumstances.

Speaking With the Media

The death of a camper, and many other emergencies, will generate media coverage. You can't prevent coverage, but you can lessen the negative impact by responding quickly and honestly.

Fundamental Guidelines

- Respect deadlines. If you can't speak to a reporter, ask what the deadline is and make sure you call back.
- Do not be confrontational. Stay calm and in control at all times.
- Don't arouse media suspicions by saying "no comment" or refusing to return calls.
- Communicate what you know and tell reporters what you don't know.
- When possible, fax, email or read a prepared statement.
- If you do speak to the media, prepare "talking points" ahead of time, so you stay on track with a consistent message. This is most easily accomplished when speaking over the phone.
- Do not speculate. The media may try to get you to draw conclusions. Don't let them. Stick to your key points.
- Do not reveal personal/medical information about campers or staff.
- Keep interviews brief and end a conversation when you need to.

Leave the Details to the Experts

- The cause of death may be related to medical conditions, an accident or crime. Do not try to speak to the media on those details.
- You should only express your sadness and discuss how you are coping with the loss at camp.
- Let the medical, legal and other authorities speak about details related to the death. An exception is if there are factual errors being reported by the authorities that need to be corrected.

Working with Television

- If your camp is on private property and you're in the middle of an emergency, you can ask the media to leave.
- When you ask reporters to leave, remember to calmly explain why and be polite. Plan a time to call them later.
- If you feel forced into an on-camera interview, ask if you can talk to the reporter off camera first. Use that time to explain the situation and try to set parameters for the subsequent on-camera interview.
- Remember that television works in short sound bites, so prepare your key points in short statements that fit this format.

Have an Exit Strategy

- Before you begin an interview, remind the reporter that you are very busy with your families, staff and campers. They are your first priorities.
- If the reporter becomes confrontational, tries to draw you into speculation or goes outside the parameters that you have set, end the interview.



- Always end the interview politely and say you are very busy and must get back to running your camp during this "difficult time."

Communicating with Families

Communicating the death of a camper requires careful, personal and sensitive handling. In addition to how you communicate with the family of the camper who has died, it is also very important how you communicate with all your camp families.

Communicating Quickly

- Be the first to contact families about an emergency. If you contact them first with your message, you gain control over the communications – even if a media report is filled with inaccuracies that are damaging to your camp's reputation.
- Stay calm and in control. Parents take their emotional cues from you.
- If possible, emphasize the positives. These may include heroic rescue attempts by staff, how much a lost camper was loved, etc.
- Be open, concerned and offer your assistance with the camper.

How You Communicate

- Phone calls, letters and email are the primary methods of communications.
- With the death of a camper, your first communication may be telephone calls to all your parents.
- Parents of the other campers in the same group or cabin should be the first ones called. In some cases, they will be the only ones called, while other parents will receive a letter.
- You need to be prepared to make hundreds of phone calls within a short time period.
- Follow-up letters should be carefully written to express your sense of loss, how you are addressing the grieving process and why it is important that you go through this process as a camp community.
- Be careful with email and web site postings. They may seem less personal, are more likely to be passed around and misused, and there is no guarantee that everyone has email or checks it on a regular basis.

Expect Support

- When you communicate openly and honestly, you will find that your camp families will be a tremendous source of support during such a difficult time.
- Most camp directors also benefit from some external (outside the camp family) support, such as a trusted friend who works in a different business. Asking a friend—someone not immediately affected by the tragedy at hand—to listen and be with you is a healthy way for you to cope.

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NOTES ON COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS AND THE MEDIA:



THE FOLLOWING DAYS, WEEKS, and YEARS

Remembrance & Mourning, Stage 2 → Continue Understanding and Healing

- Ensure that staff have time to themselves, to grieve and recharge their batteries.
 - Give them permission to grieve in healthy ways that feel right to them.
 - Expect that campers and staff will begin generating ideas for how best to commemorate the life of the deceased camper. This is normal and healthy. At first, you should simply listen and compile suggestions.
 - Do not make a hasty decision about the most meaningful and sensitive way to commemorate the camper until a few days have passed and you have had the chance yourself to reflect and consult with your senior staff and the camper's family.

- Encourage healthy staff efforts to support campers.
 - This is the job they were hired to do, so it feels empowering.
 - Do not allow staff to overstep appropriate boundaries with children. Sometimes adults' rescue fantasies overwhelm their good judgment when working with vulnerable children.

- Enlist the help of mental health professionals to assist you, the staff, and the campers.
 - "Professionals" can be helpful, but always give people a choice of resources.
 - Some campers and staff would rather talk with each other or the camp director, so the grief counselor, psychologist, or social worker may become a low-profile consultant.
 - Plan some structured grieving led by a professional (e.g., circle time, balloon releases, memory boards) and some unstructured grieving, where counselors walk around camp and talk informally with whoever wants to talk.
 - There will be some delayed stress reactions to the camper's death. Remember, not everyone grieves

- Thoughtfully consider camper and staff participation in out-of-camp funerals or memorials.
- Design an in-camp service to remember camper. Allow staff and camper participation.
- Hold regular meetings with your senior staff and be present in daily activities so that campers and staff feel cared for and so you understand the mental health of the camp first-hand.

- Give yourself time to grieve. This is personally painful and professionally demanding.
 - You can run on adrenaline for a limited time only. Eat, sleep, breathe.
 - Enlist the support of another trusted adult camping professional who can give you perspective, guidance, and support. Connect.

Reconnection with Ordinary Life, Stage 3 → The "re-establishment of self"

- The core experiences of trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others
- Recovery and healing require empowerment and connection
 - Do what you do best: Run a nurturing, energetic, fun-filled camp
 - Share the responsibility of taking care of your staff and campers
 - Talk and be with others in order to integrate, over time, this event with your own sense of who you are, what you can do, and what your core values are.
- Talk with parents about referrals to professionals for one-on-one treatment if specific campers seem to be in chronic distress or be functioning in unhealthy way.

Grief as a Growth Process → Grow to a place of normalcy, understanding, and happiness

- ❑ Bolster your prevention efforts to minimize the likelihood of a future tragedy.
- ❑ Share your experience with other camping professionals.
- ❑ Express your feelings openly, remembering that there is not “correct” timing to mourning.
- ❑ Coach parents to expect some atypical adjustment reactions when campers return home.
- ❑ Maintain a connection with the deceased camper’s family if they are receptive.

NOTES:

KEY RESOURCES:

(1) My insurance agent:

- Be sure you have talked through various scenarios and plans
- Be sure you have your agent’s emergency off-hours contact information
- Find out which mental health professionals are part of your agent’s team

(2) My communications specialist:

- Helps you *now* draft a sample phone script
- Helps you *now* draft a sample letter to parents
- Helps you *now* draft a plan to contact local media

(3) My plan for contacting many parents in a short period of time:

- “Phone call blast” company of choice:
- Staff members who would be good on the phone with parents

(4) Names of local mental health professionals:

- People who will be around during your season and would be potentially available
- Be sure you have names, office numbers, and cell numbers
- Be sure you understand their terms of payment

(4) Grief counseling specialists:

- Center for Grieving Children (Portland, ME) (207) 653-6299
- The Good Grief Program (Boston, MA) (617) 414-4005

