

CAMP SAFETY



The United Church of Canada
L'Église Unie du Canada

Camp Safety



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Introduction

Camping in The United Church of Canada predates church union. Many camps trace their origins back to Methodist, Presbyterian, or Congregationalist roots. Camps continue to be places where children, youth, adults, seniors, and families experience the wonders of creation God has given us. Camps are places where faith may be found, nurtured, and renewed.

Dedicated staff and volunteers who manage camps and camp programs are committed to providing a safe environment. The first step in achieving this is acknowledging that hazards and risks exist. From there, steps can be taken to manage those risks.

This booklet and accompanying video are intended to provide practical suggestions on identifying and managing risks for members of camp boards, staff, volunteers, and those who provide leadership for off-site activities. The booklet and video are NOT intended to be comprehensive or authoritative. For more comprehensive information, consult public and private agencies—regional, provincial, and federal—for current legislation, regulations, and requirements. A number of related websites are included in this booklet for your reference and are current at time of printing.

General Safety

Safety is everyone's business. Whether an activity is at camp, at church, or off-site, there are safety factors to be considered. Once people get talking about safety, they can identify potential risks, take the proper steps to correct existing and potential problems, and monitor property and policy on an ongoing basis. The following are areas to consider from a risk and safety perspective:

- Establishing safety guidelines and checklists for activities and trips.
- Establishing safety, first-aid, and CPR training programs for staff, volunteers, activity supervisors, and participants. Local chapters of the Canadian Red Cross and St. John Ambulance offer low-cost training.
- Preparing and maintaining comprehensive first-aid kits for use at, and away from, your facilities.
- Inspecting and maintaining property and vehicles.
- Developing emergency response procedures, including notifying authorities, parents, and key officials in your organization.
- Providing activity permission/liability release slips, medical history/medical intervention release forms, parent contact sheets, and accident reports, as well as guidelines for using these documents.
- Developing hiring codes and procedures for screening prospective staff and volunteers.

In addition to developing safety guidelines, you need to provide education on your organization's safety program—including why it is important. Getting buy-in from everyone is essential to a successful program.

Part 1. General Camp Safety

The safety and well-being of campers has always been a priority for those responsible for camp properties and affiliated programs. Over the years, practices have been put in place to ensure this, including policies and procedures on staff qualifications, food preparation, supervision of participants, property inspections, maintenance, security, and emergency plans.

For those planning an outing or retreat with a group, these measures may not be as clearly defined. While some policies or practices may be in place to adapt to different contexts, others may need to be developed. Areas to consider when planning off-site events may include supervision, security, and emergency planning particularly as it relates to missing persons and health-related emergencies.

What to Bring to Camp/Retreat

For a camp or weekend retreat experience to be successful, everyone needs to know what to bring. Many camps have a packing list that identifies the items to bring and NOT to bring. Developing a similar list for weekend retreats is also helpful. It should identify clothing and related gear appropriate for the weather and planned activities—as well as what is NOT appropriate.

Safety Inspections

For those responsible for a property, regular inspections are a natural part of preventive maintenance. Regular safety inspections not only identify potential hazards but also provide the necessary documentation to show due diligence. A checklist provides a written record of property conditions at a specific point in time and is a way to identify deficiencies and ensure follow-up.

The safety inspection needs to cover all aspects of the property: cabins, dining hall, staff quarters, craft cabin, outside activity areas,

maintenance sheds, swimming pools, and docks. The checklist should cover all aspects of the buildings or area being inspected. See the “Safety Resources” section of www.churchmutual.com (Church Mutual Insurance Company) for a sample “Self-Inspection Safety Checklist for Camps and Conference Centers.”

High-risk areas, such as maintenance or tool sheds, chemical storage areas, and areas with medications, should be secured at all times to prevent unauthorized access. Hazardous substances, such as cleaning products, fertilizers, and pesticides, should be clearly marked and locked up when not in use.

If you are renting a facility, do a complete walk around the property and facility. Note any irregularities you see. When you make your reservation or check in, ask about any rules you need to be aware of, such as no smoking, no campfires, using waterfront/pools, diving, and so on. Be sure to communicate this information to all leaders and participants.

Web Resource

- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety: www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/prevention/effectiv.html
CCOHS also has information on effective workplace inspections: see “Inspection Checklists—General Information,” www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/list_gen.html.

Smoke Detectors

In many places, smoke detectors are required by law. Testing smoke detectors and other alarm systems should be a routine part of the safety inspection. For battery-operated systems, regular testing throughout the season is essential as batteries may be removed or expire. The installation of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors should be in accordance with local fire regulations at minimum. Install a smoke detector wherever there are sleeping quarters or open flames.

When renting, take note of where smoke detectors are installed and be sure to know how to exit buildings. Determine a meeting location for your group in the event of an emergency.

Food Safety

Food and the fellowship of mealtime are integral parts of camp and other gatherings. Safe food handling practices ensure the fun is not spoiled unnecessarily. Keep the following tips in mind when planning meals, especially if you are eating outdoors:

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before and after handling food.
- Take special care storing and handling foods that are at high risk of developing harmful bacteria, including eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, mayonnaise, and dairy products.
- Keep cold food cold (less than 40°F) and hot food hot (145°F or hotter).
- Thaw frozen food in the refrigerator.
- When in doubt, throw it out.

The most common symptoms of food-borne illness include stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and fever. If an outbreak occurs and you suspect food poisoning, seek medical help immediately. If possible, keep a sample of the food eaten and contact public health for further direction.

Many provinces offer safe food handling courses that may be required for those who are responsible for preparing food. Groups that include preparing meals as part of regular activities and outings are encouraged to take these courses. Check your province's requirements to determine whether these are required.

Campfires

Campfires are a great way to end an exciting day at camp, but they can also be dangerous if safety rules are not followed.

- Check the weather before building a fire.
- Abide by fire bans that may be issued for areas.
- Choose the spot for your fire wisely—an area that is level and away from trees, logs, stumps, overhanging branches, dense dry grass, and forest litter.
- Keep the fire small.
- Have a bucket of water ready to extinguish the fire.
- Make sure a fire extinguisher is readily accessible.
- Never leave the fire unattended.
- Make sure your fire is out before you leave it. Drown it in water and check all sticks and charred materials to make sure they are cool. Check your entire campsite for possible sparks or embers.
- Perform regular maintenance such as digging out your firepit.

Web Resources

- Staying Alive: “Campfire Safety,” www.stayingalive.ca/campfire_safety.html
- Canada Safety Council: <http://archive.safety-council.org/info/sport/campfires.html>
- Technical Standards and Safety Authority: “Keeping Your Campsite Safe,” www.safetyinfo.ca/leisure_safety/articles/keep_campsite_safe.asp?KeepThis=true&TB_iframe=true&height=500&width=750

Supervision

Supervision and safety go hand in hand, but how much supervision is needed? The answer depends on a number of factors: the age of the campers, the activity, and whether other assistance is readily available should an emergency arise.

The following are general rules to consider:

- Identify the go-to person. Even adult groups need to have one person who will take charge in case of an emergency.
- Always have enough competent, trained leaders for the number of children or youth being supervised. There may be regulations that dictate the ratio of leaders to children or youth. As a rule, the number of leaders required increases proportionally with the risk of the activity and the lower the age of the campers.
- At least one adult member of your group should be trained in first aid and CPR.
- Use the buddy system for all activities, and do a periodic roll call or head count to ensure no one has wandered from the group.
- Make sure participants and their parents or guardians fully understand the nature of all scheduled activities.
- When supervising youth activities, always provide thorough instruction on safety rules corresponding to the specific activity. Virtually any activity has the potential to cause an injury.
- Where the youth group is mixed gender, make sure there is a leader for each gender.

Good practice suggests all groups should have a minimum of two leaders. Consider what would happen if there was only one leader and he or she took ill. Having at least two leaders is in the best interests of the leaders and the participants.

Screening

Screening staff and volunteers has come to be a natural part of any activity that involves children and youth, elderly people, people with disabilities, and others who are considered members of a vulnerable population. Screening is not unique to camps or retreats. Many groups have such a requirement: sports teams, activity groups, and school volunteers, to name just a few.

Every organization needs a policy on screening staff and volunteers. This policy should be developed with a full awareness of the potential risks. The risks may be human, environmental, or situational. Written job descriptions are important in this process, as is an understanding of the physical environment of the activity. For retreats and similar events, you may need to identify the risks for each activity. Taking the time to fully evaluate the risks and then determine how they will be managed is critical to an effective screening policy.

Once a screening policy is developed, it is important to apply it consistently to all staff or volunteers. The level of screening required may vary with activities. Age, familiarity, or other factors should not be allowed to influence the process.

Web Resource

- *Faithful Footsteps: Screening Procedures for Positions of Trust and Authority in The United Church of Canada*, www.united-church.ca/files/handbooks/#health, provides a 10-step process for developing a screening program.

Check-in and Check-out

Camps generally have a process by which campers check in at camp or at the bus pick-up location, and a similar process for releasing campers. Groups that are going away need a similar process so they have an accurate list of who is attending in case of an emergency. This may be as simple as having a registration list and checking off names as people arrive.

At check-out time, a process needs to be in place to ensure that children are released only to an authorized individual—parent, guardian, or other designate—for whom you have written permission. At no time should a child be released to anyone without the written permission of the parent or guardian, even if the child knows the person.

Part 2. Programming Safety

Staff Qualifications

All staff leading programs that require a specific level of expertise need to have the required qualifications as defined by the relevant provincial and national bodies. Such programs include, but are not limited to, swimming, boating (canoeing, kayaking, sailing, etc.), and ropes courses. Several national and provincial bodies identify instructor and leader qualifications, and there is provincial legislation for some of the activities. Those planning outings that involve these activities need to ensure these requirements are met.

Waterfront Activities

Water safety rules apply to swimming, boating, canoeing, and other activities. Here are some factors to give attention to:

Supervision

Supervision of waterfront activities needs to be provided by qualified individuals as determined by the licensing body or legislation. All water activities should be supervised by individuals with lifeguard and lifesaving qualifications.

Access and Security of Area

Restrict access to the waterfront area, whether it is a pool or natural waterfront, by means of a physical barrier. One person should be in charge of granting access to participants during an activity. Having a check-in/check-out procedure is a way of determining how many participants are involved and who they are. This information is vital in the event of an emergency. Use the buddy system during waterfront activities to keep track of participants.

Secure chemical and filtration rooms and mechanical rooms for pools at all times to prevent unauthorized access.

Inspection of Area

Before every use, check the physical condition of a camp's swimming area for safety hazards. Keep the area clear of clutter and debris, and clearly identify any natural hazards. Boundaries for swimming and non-swimming areas and markers indicating changes in depth levels need to be visible and clearly marked. Do regular maintenance of the area, including decks and docks, to keep it safe.

Swimming

- Swimming assessment and designated swimming areas: Complete a "swimmer assessment" for participants of all water activities, not just swimming. The best way is through a swimming test before the start of activities. In addition, there needs to be a way of determining the participant's swimming designation. How this is done may be directed by the number of participants and the levels of swimming ability. For example, coloured bracelets may be used to designate different swimming levels. Designate different areas for various levels of swimming competency—non-swimmer, beginner, intermediate, and advanced—with adequate supervision to cover all areas.
- Access to first-aid essentials: In addition to being trained in emergency procedures and rescue techniques, supervisors must have access to first-aid essentials: life-saving aids, first-aid kits and related equipment, and emergency communication access (phone, walkie-talkie, two-way radio). Make sure these items are readily accessible in case of an emergency. Post emergency numbers at the site of water activities.

Web Resources

- Lifesaving Society of Canada: www.lifesaving.ca
- Canadian Red Cross: "Swimming & Water Safety" page, www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=000881&tid=024

Boating

Making sure that watercraft is properly equipped and operated is the first line of accident prevention. Before embarking on any boating-related adventure, do a thorough check to ensure equipment is in good repair. The following are things to consider when planning a boating program, whether it involves canoes, kayaks, or sailboats or even going fishing in a watercraft:

- Leaders of boating programs need to be properly certified and aware of current laws and regulations.
- Always check the weather report. Never go boating when weather conditions are hazardous.
- Provide an approved life preserver or safety vest for every passenger that is to be worn at all times.
- Ensure each craft is outfitted with the required equipment.
- Don't overload. The waterline should be above water.
- Distribute weight equally from bow to stern and from side to side to avoid tipping over.
- If a boat should capsize, occupants should stay together and use the overturned boat for flotation support.

Web Resources

- Rowing Canada: www.rowingcanada.org/home
- Rowing BC: www.rowingbc.ca
- Alberta Rowing Association: www.albertarowing.ca
- Saskatchewan Rowing Association: www.saskrowing.ca
- Manitoba Rowing Association: www.rowmanitoba.ca
- Row Ontario: www.rowontario.ca/content/home.asp
- Quebec Rowing Association: www.avironquebec.ca
- Nova Scotia: www.novascotiarowing.ca
- Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association—Paddle Canada: www.crca.ca

- Recreational Canoeing Association of British Columbia (RCABC): www.bccanoe.com
- Paddle Alberta: www.paddlealberta.org
- Paddle Manitoba: www.paddle.mb.ca
- Ontario Recreational Canoeing and Kayaking Association: www.orca.on.ca
- Canoe/Kayak New Brunswick: www.canoekayaknb.org
- Canoe Kayak Nova Scotia: www.ckns.ca
- Newfoundland and Labrador Paddling Association: www.kayakers.nf.ca/nlpa

Hiking and Biking

Hikes and bike trips are common outings during spring, summer, and fall. Following the rules of the road and taking the necessary precautions will make them safe activities. Participants need to know what to do if they get lost or separated from the group. Hikes and bike trips are activities for which the buddy system should be implemented.

Hikes

- Plan the route in advance.
- Bring along a compass and a detailed map of the area.
- Set your pace to accommodate the weakest member of the group.
- No hiker should be allowed to run ahead of the lead staff member or fall behind the rear staff member.
- If you become lost, stay in one place and remain calm.
- When walking along a road, keep to the left (against the traffic) so you can see oncoming vehicles and get out of the way.

Bike Trips

- Use recommended bicycle routes that match the riders' experience and physical ability.
- Have a van or other vehicle accompany the group to transport injured or exhausted cyclists, bikes, and repair equipment.
- Wear bicycle helmets at all times.
- Before starting on a trek, do a maintenance check on each bicycle, including testing brakes and tire condition.
- Ride single file in small groups of six to eight people, including an adult supervisor.
- Maintain a safe distance between each bike. Stay to the far right of the road, going with other traffic.

Winter Activities

Part of the allure of winter is the outdoor sports activities to be enjoyed. Putting safety first and dressing for the weather will keep the fun in the outing. The following are some tips to consider as you plan winter activities:

- As part of the planning, stress the importance of proper attire, nutrition, and hydration to all participants.
- Recognize hazardous weather conditions and limit activity accordingly.

Sledding/Tobogganning

- Make sure runs are free of obstructions—visible and hidden—and that there is adequate area to stop at the bottom of the hill.
- Position supervisors at the top, middle, and bottom of the hill.
- Don't overload toboggans.
- Riders should always slide feet first.

Ice Skating

- Skate only where the ice has been tested.
- Keep horseplay to a minimum.
- Stay alert to avoid collisions or dangerous falls.
- Helmets are a good precaution for all skaters but particularly beginners.

Skiing

- Skiers should stick to slopes that suit their ability levels.
- Skiers should never ski alone.
- If someone is injured on the slope, do not try to move the person. Send for the ski patrol and mark off the area to warn other skiers.

Other Athletic Activities

Athletics provide opportunities for fun, fellowship, and excitement for participants. When running such programs, make sure equipment is in good repair and the necessary protective equipment is used. Outdoor playing fields need to be checked regularly for unsafe objects. For nighttime activities, each person should have a flashlight.

Rope courses, zip lines, and rock climbing are all popular activities. Only systems and walls that have been installed and inspected regularly by trained personnel should be used, and the activities should be supervised by qualified personnel.

Archery ranges are popular camp areas. Follow a few practical safety measures:

- Keep shooting ranges well away from the rest of the camp and activities.
- Supervise shooting ranges at all times.

- Secure the equipment when it is not in use.
- Post safety rules at the range and discuss them with all participants before starting the activity.

Web Resources

- Adventure Works: www.adventureworks.org/index.htm
- Federation of Canadian Archers: www.fca.ca

Part 3. Emergency Camp Procedures

“Be prepared.” There could be no better phrase to remember when it comes to emergency planning. It is much easier to respond in an emergency when a plan is in place and people have been trained in how to respond. Camps have emergency plans in place, but groups going on a retreat or outing should also have basic emergency plans. The following outlines some common emergency plans:

Missing Person

Prevention is always the first line of defence. There should be enough supervisors for the number of participants based on age and the nature of the activity. Implement the buddy system with regular check-ins. Participants should never be allowed to wander off or leave the group on their own—they must stay with their buddy. At no time should a child leave the camp with someone else unless you have written permission from the parent or guardian. Don’t break this rule even if the child appears to know the person.

If a participant goes missing, whether a child, a youth, or even an adult, an organized search needs to be conducted. Whoever discovers that the person is missing should start the search, and your plan should clearly identify who’s in charge once the alarm has been sounded.

The majority of your staff or group will be assigned areas to search while the remainder attend to the other campers/participants. A description of the missing person, including what she or he was last seen wearing, is important.

Using a grid to search, groups should go to each area and then report back to the main post. Check all areas of the grounds, including a thorough search of the interior of buildings. Calling out for the missing person by name with a reassuring tone is very important.

Once emergency services arrive, they will likely take charge. Provide them with as much information as possible.

Once the missing person is found, take time to review the event. Try to determine how the person came to be missing, identify any corrective action that needs to be taken, and provide follow-up and support as necessary. This may involve communicating with participants and their families.

If the missing person search involves waterfront, very specific steps are involved. While everyone may have a role to play, waterfront staff will take the lead in this area.

Health-Related Emergencies

Have a plan in place for medical emergencies, which may range from minor injuries requiring medical attention to a life-threatening situation. Your emergency kit should include the names and contact information of all the participants and other numbers to call in the event of an emergency.

Camps generally have a designated staff person to address health concerns. These individuals have specific qualifications for this role, ranging from general first aid to a licensed physician. Whatever the qualifications, the individual must know his or her limits and what to do if the medical treatment required exceeds those limits.

It is recommended that groups on outings have a well-stocked first-aid kit and at least one leader with standard first-aid training. The first-aid kit should be easy to access, not locked in a vehicle or someone's room.

Web Resources

- St. John's Ambulance: www.sja.ca/Pages/default.aspx
- Canadian Red Cross: www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=000178&tid=015&gclid=CKu78O34350CFQtN5QodzzT1MQ

Other Emergencies

Other emergency plans that need to be in place include ones for fire, severe weather, and evacuation.

If you are a group on an outing, it is important to familiarize yourself with emergency exits at the facility as well where fire extinguishers and telephones are located. You should have an emergency kit that includes the names and contact information of all the participants and other numbers to call in the event of an emergency.

If you live in an area that is prone to tornadoes, hurricanes, or other natural phenomena, be sure everyone knows what to do, particularly if they are outside. Even severe thunderstorms and lightning pose a threat.

Web Resource

- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety—Emergency Planning: www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/planning.html

Summary

Safety is everyone's concern, but those who are responsible for supervising others have a greater need to be aware of the risks of activities undertaken. Being aware of the risks and taking the necessary steps to reduce them can go a long way toward making camp, retreats, and similar outings enjoyable experiences for all.

