

Working together to keep your child safe at summer camp



By Josette D. Manning, Cabinet Secretary of the Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families

As summer weather approaches and the school year winds down, it is never too early to start looking at summer camp options for your children.

While you certainly want camp to be a fun experience for your child, you should also be concerned with whether the camp's facilities are safe and whether the camp counselors and staff are trustworthy. It's important to ask some essential questions when leaving your children in the care of others for several hours each day, overnight, or for an extended period of time.

In an effort to help parents become educated consumers and champions for their children's well-being, the Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families (DSCYF) suggests parents ask these questions when looking for a summer camp:

- **What is the ratio of staff to children?** The Division of Public Health (DPH) requires day camps that they regulate to have a 1:6 staff-to-child ratio for children 5 and younger, a 1:9 ratio for ages 6-7, and a 1:10 ratio for ages 8-14. Not all summer camps are regulated by DPH, however, so it is important to ask about staff ratios if you are not certain of the camp's policy on the number of students per staff member.
- **What type of training is required of staff?** Are they qualified to render basic first aid? Are they trained to recognize and report suspicions of child abuse? Do volunteers receive the same training as paid staff?
- **What is the camp policy on parental access?** Delaware licensed child care providers must provide parents immediate access to their children. Does the summer camp allow for parental drop-ins at any time?
- **Does the camp have a policy for screening visitors or non-staff?** Can anyone enter the camp's grounds and walk around freely or are they required to sign in? What about workers making deliveries, outside maintenance staff or even those who remove trash? Have staff been trained to report anything suspicious?

•Does the camp have policies or guidelines governing acceptable contact between youth and staff? According to the American Camp Association, it's not appropriate for one camp employee or volunteer to be in seclusion with one camper and out of eyesight of others. Policies and procedures should minimize opportunities for a camp employee or volunteer to be alone with a single camper and out of eyesight of others.

• Has the camp conducted background checks on staff and volunteers? The Joseph R. "Beau" Biden III Child Protection Act strengthens background check requirements for organizations such as summer camps and private schools. The law, which went into effect on April 7, 2016, requires summer camps to obtain the following: 1) a fingerprinted Delaware background check completed by the Delaware State Bureau of Identification (SBI); 2) a fingerprinted



national background check completed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); and 3) a Child Protection Registry check completed by the Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families. As an alternative, private schools and associated youth camps must perform a name-based Delaware criminal background check for prospective employees, volunteers and contractors through the Delaware Justice Information System (DELJIS) and an out-of-state criminal record check using private, third party providers, provided that any out-of-state criminal record check includes a social security trace search and county-based criminal record search in the counties where the individual has resided within the past 10 years.

Under the new law, private schools and camps operated by private schools may elect not to meet the three standards outlined above. However, they must inform parents of their decision and must obtain and retain for at least one year a signed acknowledgement from the child's parents or guardians

Whether your child is going to an athletic camp, nature camp, Boy/Girl Scout camp, or a camp run by an early learning center or religious or nonprofit organization, asking the right questions will help you to ensure your children are well cared for in a structured and safe environment.

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The Children's Department provides services to children who have been abused, neglected, are dependent, have mental health or substance problems, and/or have been adjudicated delinquent by the Courts as well as prevention services targeted toward all youth. For more information, please visit www.kids.delaware.gov.