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Cuts, Falls and Getting Hit by Balls: What Could Go Wrong at Camp and Why You Shouldn't Worry About It

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

As parents, it is our job to worry about our kids. Releasing our children to the staff at summer camp requires a tremendous leap of faith. Accidents and illnesses are just part of life. However, there are usually safeguards woven throughout the fabric of camp life to help protect your child. While none of the camps I spoke with had a resident camp doctor, all had a thorough and decisive plan to address any medical or general safety issues that campers might encounter.

Mary Sullivan Marvin is a registered nurse and Health Care Director for YMCA San Diego County Camps Marston and Raintree Ranch in Julian (www.ymca.org/camp). While she often attends to bloody noses, Marvin explains that campers' most common complaints are physical manifestations of homesickness, such as nausea and stomachache. So, she finds herself doling out large doses of TLC more often than anything in her well-stocked first-aid kit.

Marvin suggests that parents give the camp permission to give their child simple, over-the-counter medications so that if their child gets a bump or an upset stomach they can be made more comfortable quickly and easily.

Campers, Bats and Balls

Mary Johnson is the Director of Sports Camps for the University of San Diego's Summer Camps and Conferences (<http://camps.sandiego.edu>). Johnson comments that it can be reassuring for parents if a camp is accredited by the American Camping Association (www.acacamps.org). Accreditation requires abiding by a number of standards involving staffing, safety and medical issues.

The most common trouble spots are related to San Diego's summer heat, according to Johnson. If campers don't drink enough water they may get somewhat dehydrated and feel dizzy. Sunburn is another common occurrence. Sprained wrists and ankles are typical injuries.

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The USD sports camps have a certified athletic trainer on site who assesses the health and well-being of all campers within a day of arrival. When children are injured, the athletic trainer evaluates whether to call the public safety office. The public safety office calls 911 if necessary, and meets the ambulance at the campus gate to direct them immediately to the injured camper.

Johnson relates that a child was recently hit in the head with a ball and the athletic trainer decided the ambulance should be called. “We always err on the side of caution. We also called the parents, of course, and they arrived as quickly as the ambulance. X-rays were taken and the child did have a concussion, and so was taken care of by the hospital, which is a short distance from the camp,” says Johnson.

The resident staff is first aid and CPR-certified, as are most of the athletic coaches. The staff is also trained in emergency preparedness through the public safety office. The USD camps have the added benefit of campus security, on duty 24/7.

Johnson advises parents to talk to children about the camp rules and what will be expected of them. The USD camps have a very strict 10 p.m. curfew. “We feel that the kids need their rest if they’re going to keep up the activity level required by these sports,” Johnson says.

Occasionally a camper arrives with a pre-existing injury. The child thinks they are more fully healed than they actually are, and then they re-injure themselves. So parents need to stress the importance of not pushing it too hard.

No Horsin’ Around!

Horseback riding and summer camp go together like cocoa and marshmallows. Tom Madeyski, Executive Director of the Resident Camp Branch of the San Diego County YMCA, reminds parents, “When kids are riding horses, they are sitting on top of a 1000-pound animal. There is inherent risk that people don’t often think about.” There are strict horseback riding rules at YMCA’s Raintree Ranch in Julian. “Kids are known to complain, ‘I wish we could gallop,’” Madeyski shares.

The staff training at Raintree Ranch includes a 5-day intensive safety course by an expert from the American Association for Horsemanship. The training certifies the staff as horseback riding instructors. The expert also does a safety inspection of the facilities and equipment.

The instructors evaluate each child’s level of comfort, awareness, and skill with horses. Children are assigned to groups according to ability. The beginners stay in an enclosed arena rather than riding out on the trails. Everyone wears helmets.

Surfing Safari!

Of all the safety concerns facing parents, inadequately supervised water play is certainly near the top of the list. Cass Husted is Marketing Director of Ocean Experience (www.oceanexperience.net), which operates camps in Mission Beach and Ocean Beach, and will open new camps in Encinitas and Solana Beach this summer. The camps offer lessons in surfing, kayaking, body-boarding, snorkeling, and skim-boarding.

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Husted says, “In all the 14 years the camp has been operating, the worst medical problem has been a stingray sting.” The sting required a visit to the lifeguard for a heat pack, but most injuries can be managed with the camp’s deep first aid kit. Although the staff rarely bothers the lifeguards for medical emergencies, they do work closely with them to maintain the highest level of safety.

Though there is not a swimming skills requirement to attend the camp, the staff does assess how comfortable the children are in the water. The instructors learn a lot about the children’s skill level from paddle relays. “The youngest children do not go beyond chest-high water. They’re generally in the shallow white water unless they’re advanced and want to go a little bit further out,” says Husted.

All instructors are first aid and CPR-certified and go through a rigorous, two-week training before they meet the students. The staff-to-student ratio is 1:4 in the water and 1:5 out of the water. Sun safety is also essential, as the kids are outside most of the day. They apply sunscreen at least three times a day, and Husted suggests kids also wear hats. The most common complaint is feeling cold in the water. Husted says that it’s preferable for children to bring their own wetsuits that have been specifically fitted to them. “The wetsuits issued by the camp have more general sizing and might not keep your child as warm,” Husted explains.

So, in gearing up for camp, take time to ask questions regarding safety and medical preparedness. Conversations with the directors and counselors will reward you with the knowledge that your children are having fun in an environment where safety comes first.

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Ondine Brooks Kuraoka is a freelance writer from San Diego. As a mother and, thus, a worrier, she feels much better after having researched this article. She can be reached online at www.sandiegofreelancewriter.com.