THE SAFETY NAVIGATOR

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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO CAMP SAFETY

A compass for camp safety.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SAFE Summers FOUNDATION

www.thesafetynavigator.org

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO CAMP SAFETY

THE SAFETY NAVIGATOR

WHO IS THE SAFETY NAVIGATOR?

The Safety Navigator is a nonprofit organization that supports camps in building strong, practical safety practices. We work alongside camp leaders to provide tools, frameworks, and expert guidance that help turn safety plans into real-world action.

OUR GOAL IS SIMPLE

Help camps run safer programs and help parents feel confident asking the right questions.

SAFE Summers FOUNDATION

WHO IS THE SAFE SUMMERS FOUNDATION?

The Safe Summers Foundation was launched by a coalition of parents of the 25 campers and two counselors ("Heaven's 27") who lost their lives while in the care of Camp Mystic in Hunt, Texas, during the July 4, 2025, flash floods. Our mission is rooted in the hope that such a preventable tragedy never happens to another family.

OUR MISSION

We keep children safe through prevention, preparation, and protection while preserving the joy and tradition of summer camp.

WHAT IS THIS GUIDE?

This guide helps parents understand how to inquire about a camp's safety approach in a clear and constructive way. It provides:

- Topics to discuss with camps
- Questions to ask
- What strong safety practices look like
- Guidance on interpreting responses

You do not need safety expertise to use this guide.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

When your child attends camp, the organization temporarily assumes responsibility for their wellbeing. Most camps work incredibly hard to provide safe environments.

Asking a camp thoughtful questions before sending your child:

- Encourages transparency
- Supports a strong safety culture at that camp
- Helps you make informed decisions
- Strengthens safety across the entire camp industry

Organizations focused on child safety are typically open and comfortable discussing their practices when asked.

HOW SHOULD THIS GUIDE BE USED?

Use this guide as a conversation starter, not an inspection checklist. You can:

- Request a conversation with the camp's Safety Coordinator or Director, or
- Send the email template included at the end of this resource.

REMEMBER

- Camps may be receiving many safety inquiries
- Be patient and flexible with how information is shared
- Approach conversations with curiosity and partnership

OVERVIEW

HOW TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION WITH CAMPS

A whole-of-camp approach to safety

Strong camps do not treat safety as a single policy or document. Instead, safety is embedded across every part of camp operations.

Industry standards recognize that safety includes leadership, facilities, staff qualifications, supervision, health practices, and program delivery working together as one system.

A whole-of-camp approach means safety is visible in:

- Leadership decisions
- Staff hiring and training
- Daily supervision
- Activity design
- Emergency preparedness
- Communication with parents
- Continuous learning and improvement

When speaking with camps, listen for how safety connects across the entire experience, not just whether a policy or document exists.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS GUIDE

We recommend parents explore the following areas:

- A — Safety leadership and culture
- B — Staff recruitment and screening
- C — Staff training
- D — Supervision and camper ratios
- E — Safeguarding & Child Protection
- F — Emergency preparedness
- G — Aquatic safety (if water activities exist)
- H — Risk management and improvement
- I — Parent communication

GETTING STARTED

HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION

Ask to speak with:

- The Safety Coordinator, or
- Camp Director or leadership team member responsible for safety.

You might say:

> **"WE'RE LEARNING MORE ABOUT CAMP SAFETY PRACTICES AND WOULD LOVE TO UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR CAMP APPROACHES SAFETY PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS."**

If a meeting isn't possible, sending written questions is completely appropriate. See the end of this guide for an email template.

A SAFETY LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

How the camp prioritizes safety in its leadership, values, and day-to-day environment.

ASK

- Who oversees safety at this camp?
- How is safety discussed with staff, counselors, and campers?
- How do staff, counselors, and campers raise safety concerns?

LISTEN FOR

- [ ] **A clearly identified safety leader**

  Many camps designate a Safety Coordinator or Safety Director responsible for overseeing safety planning, risk assessments, incident management, and training. In some states this role is required by regulation.

  Parents can ask what qualifications or safety-related training this person has completed, such as risk management training, emergency response certifications, or camp leadership safety training. They can also inquire about what other responsibilities this person may have and how much time they allocate to safety.

- [ ] **Staff encouraged to speak up**

  Strong camps create an environment where staff and counselors are encouraged to report hazards, mistakes, or concerns without fear of blame.

  Leaders should emphasize that raising safety concerns early helps prevent incidents.

- [ ] **Regular safety conversations and planning**

  Strong safety cultures include frequent safety briefings or check-ins. This may include leadership meetings before the camp season, weekly staff briefings, or short daily conversations reviewing upcoming activities, weather conditions, camper needs, or emerging risks.

- [ ] **Safety described as everyone's responsibility**

  In strong safety cultures, safety is not just the responsibility of leadership. Camp leaders, counselors, and campers are all encouraged to look out for each other and take ownership of safe behavior.

B STAFF RECRUITMENT & SCREENING

How the camp selects, vets, and hires staff and/or volunteers to ensure they are suitable to work with children.

ASK

- How are staff and/or volunteers screened and selected?
- Are background and reference checks conducted?
- Are returning staff and volunteers re-screened?

LISTEN FOR

- [ ] **Background and reference checks for all staff**

  Background screening requirements vary widely across the United States, including both criminal and child protection registries. Twenty-three states do not require camps to conduct background checks, and many states that do only require checks every five years. Best practice camps typically conduct background checks every season or every year, even when not legally required. Parents can ask what is included in a camp's checks and whether they include national criminal databases, not just state records.

- [ ] **Clear behavioral expectations during hiring**

  Good camps clearly communicate their code of conduct, supervision expectations, and safeguarding and child protection policies during the recruitment process, so staff understand expectations before they begin work.

- [ ] **Reference checks and careful hiring decisions**

  Strong hiring practices include speaking directly with references and evaluating candidates not only for skills but also for judgment, maturity, and ability to work with children.

- [ ] **Ongoing screening for returning staff and/or volunteers**

  Many camp staff and/or volunteers return year after year. Best practice camps still conduct background checks or screening each season and monitor behavior and performance continuously throughout employment.

C TRAINING: STAFF, VOLUNTEER, COUNSELOR, CAMPER

How staff are prepared before and during camp to manage safety, risks, and camper wellbeing.

ASK

- What training happens for camp leadership throughout the year?
- How are staff and volunteers trained for emergencies?
- What training happens for counselors before the camp season starts?
- What training happens for campers when they arrive at camp?
- Is training ongoing during the camp season?

LISTEN FOR

- [ ] **Structured safety training for camp leadership**
  Camp directors and senior staff should participate in leadership-level safety training before each season. This may include risk management, emergency planning, incident management, safeguarding and child protection, and supervision strategies.
- [ ] **Structured pre-season training for counselors**
  Most camps run a multi-day or week-long pre-camp orientation where counselors learn supervision practices, safeguarding and child protection policies, activity safety procedures, and how to respond to emergencies.
- [ ] **Ongoing coaching during the season**
  Strong camps continue reinforcing safety throughout the summer with regular check-ins, coaching, and reminders so safety remains a daily focus.
- [ ] **Emergency response training and drills**
  Staff and volunteers should receive training on how to respond to emergencies such as severe weather, medical incidents, missing campers, or evacuation scenarios. Camps should also conduct drills so staff can practice these responses before campers arrive.
- [ ] **Safety orientation for campers**
  When campers arrive, they should receive clear guidance about camp rules, safety expectations, and how to get help if they need it.

D SUPERVISION & CAMPER RATIOS

How campers are actively supervised and how many staff are responsible for each group of children.

ASK

- What are your staff-to-camper ratios?
- How is supervision maintained throughout the day?
- How are transitions and free time supervised?

LISTEN FOR

- [ ] **Clear supervision ratios appropriate to age and activity**
  Best practice staff-to-camper ratios generally vary by age. For example, younger campers (ages 5–6) are often supervised at about 1 staff member for every 5 campers. Ages 7–8 may operate around 1:6, campers aged 9–14 around 1:8, and older teens around 1:10. Younger children typically require more supervision.

- [ ] **Active supervision rather than passive observation**
  Staff should be actively engaged with their camper groups, regularly scanning the environment, interacting with campers, and anticipating risks, rather than simply watching from a distance.

- [ ] **Higher supervision for higher-risk activities**
  Activities such as swimming, boating, hiking, climbing, or ropes courses often require tighter supervision ratios. For example, waterfront activities may operate around 1:6 to 1:10 supervision in addition to certified lifeguards, while climbing or adventure activities may require ratios closer to 1:4 to 1:6.

- [ ] **Clear responsibility for each group of campers**
  Camps should assign specific counselors responsibility for defined camper groups, so every child is clearly supervised throughout the day.

E SAFEGUARDING & CAMPER PROTECTION

The policies and behaviors in place to protect campers from physical, emotional, and sexual harm, including how concerns are reported and handled.

ASK

- What does the camp do for abuse prevention?
- Tell me about your policies for staff/camper, camper/camper, and staff/staff interactions, and how you focus on boundaries.
- How do you train staff on those policies? Is it with an external provider, online, or in person?
- What mechanism is in place to assess whether boundaries are being kept?

LISTEN FOR

- [ ] **Two-adult supervision policies**
  Most abuse happens when a child is alone with one adult or another child. To reduce this risk, strong camps require more than one adult to be present in private spaces and during certain activities, including in cabins, in vehicles, and in changing areas or bathrooms. This increases accountability and makes inappropriate behavior less likely.

- [ ] **Open, visible environments**
  Activities and conversations should take place where others can easily see and step in if needed. Coaching, one-on-one chats, and other interactions should happen in open spaces, not behind closed doors or out of sight of other staff.

- [ ] **Encouraging campers to speak up**
  Campers should know how to report a concern if they are harmed or feel unsafe. Options might include talking to a counselor, a designated safety contact, or through a confidential reporting process, all explained in age-appropriate language.

- [ ] **Supervision in high-risk areas**
  Good camps have clear supervision practices in places where privacy is needed but safety must still be maintained. For example, staff may supervise from just outside changing areas or ensure multiple staff members are nearby when campers change. Extra supervision is also important in mixed-age settings, to make sure two campers are never alone together unsupervised.

- [ ] **Clear code of conduct**
  Camps should have written expectations for how staff, volunteers, and campers are expected to behave. This includes respecting boundaries around physical contact, communication with children during or outside of camp, social media interactions, and privacy. Policies should also prohibit taking photos or videos of children without leadership consent.

- [ ] **Mandatory reporting procedures**
  Staff and volunteers should be trained to recognize warning signs and know how to report concerns. Camps should have reporting policies and follow mandatory reporting laws where they apply. Staff should also know how and where to report if concerns involve camp leaders.

F EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS & RESPONSE

How the camp plans for, practices, and responds to emergencies or unexpected situations.

ASK

- Do you have an Emergency Action Plan?
- What emergencies do you prepare for based on your location and activities?
- Do you have defined evacuation routes and shelter locations?
- Do you have relationships with local emergency responders such as police, fire, or EMS?
- How are parents notified if something happens?

LISTEN FOR

- [ ] **Written emergency action plans**
  Camps should have documented emergency procedures covering situations such as severe weather, medical emergencies, fires, missing campers, or evacuation scenarios.
- [ ] **Clearly defined evacuation routes and shelter locations**
  Camps should know exactly where campers would go during an evacuation or shelter situation, both on the camp property and at off-site activity locations.
- [ ] **Staff trained in emergency response actions**
  Staff should know how to respond to emergencies through clearly defined actions such as evacuation, sheltering indoors, or securing buildings.
- [ ] **Clear communication with parents**
  Parents should understand how and when they will be contacted if an incident occurs and who will communicate updates.
- [ ] **Planning for site-specific hazards**
  Every camp location presents different risks. Camps should be able to describe the most relevant hazards for their location and activities, for example, severe weather or wildfire risk.
- [ ] **Established relationships with local responders**
  Strong camps coordinate with local emergency services such as police, fire departments, and EMS. Many camps share site maps and emergency plans, or conduct joint planning with responders before the camp season begins.
- [ ] **Practice drills**
  Camps should practice emergency procedures through drills, so staff are prepared before an emergency occurs.

G AQUATIC SAFETY (SWIMMING & WATER ACTIVITIES)

How water-based activities are supervised and managed to keep campers safe in and around water.

ASK

- Are certified lifeguards present at all water activities?
- How are swimmers assessed?
- How is supervision managed at waterfronts?
- What safety equipment is available?
- Are staff trained in CPR/AED and first aid?

LISTEN FOR

- [ ] **Certified lifeguards appropriate to the water environment**
  Lifeguards should hold recognized lifeguard certifications and be trained specifically for the environment they supervise, such as pools, lakes, or open water.
- [ ] **Designated swimming areas and supervision zones**
  Waterfront areas should be clearly divided into zones so lifeguards and counselors can effectively monitor swimmers.
- [ ] **Clear swimmer ability classification**
  Many camps assess swimmers at the start of camp and group them into ability levels to ensure campers participate only in activities appropriate for their swimming ability.
- [ ] **CPR, AED, and first aid trained staff**
  Staff working near water should be trained in CPR, AED use, and first aid so they can respond immediately if an incident occurs.
- [ ] **Rescue equipment available**
  Equipment such as rescue tubes, reaching poles, life jackets, and first aid kits should be visible and readily accessible.

H RISK MANAGEMENT & CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

How the camp identifies risks and continuously improves its safety practices over time.

ASK

- How do you identify risks before camp begins?
- How do you learn from incidents?
- Have you had previous incidents, and what did you learn from them?
- What safety improvements have you made recently?
- Are you part of any safety communities or programs that support continuous improvement?

LISTEN FOR

- [ ] **Regular risk assessments**
  Camps should evaluate potential risks associated with activities, facilities, and environments before the camp season begins. Many camps complete structured risk assessments that review supervision levels, activity hazards, emergency preparedness, and environmental risks. Some camps use formal tools such as The Safety Navigator risk assessment process to guide this work.

- [ ] **Incident review and learning processes**
  When incidents occur, strong camps review what happened, identify contributing factors, and look for opportunities to improve procedures, training, or supervision so similar incidents are less likely to happen again.

- [ ] **Evidence of ongoing improvement**
  Camps should be able to describe safety improvements they have implemented over time, demonstrating that safety practices are regularly reviewed and strengthened.

- [ ] **Participation in safety communities or improvement initiatives**
  Some camps participate in safety-focused communities or programs that provide tools, training, and expert guidance to help camps continuously improve their safety practices. For example, camps that are part of The Safety Navigator community have access to risk assessment tools, safety resources, and a network of camp leaders working together to strengthen safety practices across the industry.

- [ ] **Openness about past incidents and improvements**
  No camp environment is completely risk-free. Strong camps are willing to talk about incidents that have occurred and explain how they responded and what improvements were made afterward.

1 COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

How the camp keeps families informed, communicates during incidents, and responds to parent questions or concerns.

ASK

- How will parents receive updates during the camp season?
- When would families be contacted about incidents?
- Who should parents contact with concerns?

LISTEN FOR

- ☐ **Clear communication channels**
  Camps should explain how they communicate with families, such as through phone calls, emails, or camp communication platforms.
- ☐ **Transparency and openness**
  Strong camps are comfortable discussing their safety practices and answering questions openly.
- ☐ **Defined escalation processes**
  Parents should understand what types of incidents would prompt immediate communication versus routine updates.

MAKE A JUDGMENT CALL

There is no single perfect checklist. Only you can decide what feels right for your child and family. Consider:

- Did the camp respond openly?
- Were answers clear and consistent?
- Did safety feel embedded in daily operations?
- Did you feel comfortable asking questions?

By asking thoughtful questions, you are helping strengthen safety for all children.

THE SAFETY NAVIGATOR

COMPANION CHECKLIST

SUMMER CAMP SAFETY CONVERSATION CHECKLIST

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WHAT IS THIS CHECKLIST?

Use this checklist after speaking with a camp to help you reflect on what you heard. A strong camp should be able to confidently answer most of these questions.

A SAFETY LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

- [ ] The camp has a clearly identified person responsible for safety.
- [ ] The camp describes regular safety discussions or briefings with staff.
- [ ] Staff are encouraged to raise safety concerns without fear of blame.
- [ ] Safety is described as everyone's responsibility across staff and campers.

B STAFF RECRUITMENT & SCREENING

- [ ] The camp conducts background checks for staff.
- [ ] Background checks are conducted every season or regularly, not just once.
- [ ] The camp conducts reference checks during hiring.
- [ ] Returning staff are re-screened or evaluated each year.

C STAFF TRAINING

- [ ] Camp leadership receives safety and emergency training before the season.
- [ ] Counselors participate in structured pre-camp training.
- [ ] Staff are trained in how to respond to emergencies.
- [ ] The camp conducts practice drills for emergencies.
- [ ] Campers receive a safety orientation when they arrive.
- [ ] Safety expectations are reinforced throughout the camp season.

D SUPERVISION & CAMPER RATIOS

- [ ] The camp clearly explained their staff-to-camper ratios.
- [ ] Ratios appear appropriate for the age of campers.
- [ ] Higher supervision levels are used for higher-risk activities.
- [ ] Staff are expected to provide active supervision, not passive observation.
- [ ] Each group of campers has clearly assigned supervising staff.

E SAFEGUARDING & CAMPER PROTECTION

- [ ] The camp avoids staff being alone with campers in private settings.
- [ ] Interactions between staff and campers are observable and interruptible.
- [ ] The camp has clear codes of conduct for staff behavior.
- [ ] Campers have multiple ways to report concerns or ask for help.
- [ ] Staff are trained in mandatory reporting and safeguarding responsibilities.
- [ ] The camp has clear supervision expectations in cabins or changing areas.
- [ ] Policies clearly define safe boundaries and supervision for interactions between campers.

F EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS & RESPONSE

- [ ] The camp has a written Emergency Action Plan.
- [ ] The camp identified common hazards specific to their location and activities.
- [ ] The camp has clearly defined evacuation routes and shelter locations.
- [ ] The camp has established relationships with local emergency responders (police, fire, EMS).
- [ ] Staff receive training on how to respond to emergencies.
- [ ] The camp conducts practice drills for emergencies.
- [ ] The camp explained how parents would be notified if an incident occurs.

G AQUATIC SAFETY (IF APPLICABLE)

- [ ] Certified lifeguards supervise all swimming or waterfront activities.
- [ ] Staff near water are trained in CPR, AED use, and first aid.
- [ ] The camp conducts swim ability assessments for campers.
- [ ] Swimming areas are clearly defined and supervised.
- [ ] Rescue equipment is available and accessible at water locations.

H RISK MANAGEMENT & CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

- [ ] The camp conducts risk assessments before the camp season.
- [ ] The camp reviews incidents to identify lessons and improvements.
- [ ] The camp was open about how they handle and learn from incidents.
- [ ] The camp could describe recent safety improvements they have made.
- [ ] The camp participates in safety initiatives or communities such as The Safety Navigator.

I COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

- [ ] The camp explained how they communicate with parents during the season and how the campers can communicate externally when required.
- [ ] The camp described when parents would be contacted about incidents.
- [ ] The camp clearly identified who parents can contact with concerns.
- [ ] The camp answered safety questions openly and transparently.

TIP FOR PARENTS

You don’t need every box checked, but a strong camp should comfortably address most of these topics and explain their safety practices clearly.

EMAIL OUTREACH TEMPLATE

START THE CONVERSATION

Use this email to start the conversation with your camp.

Dear Camp Director/Camp Leadership Team,

I hope you are doing well.

As our family prepares for the upcoming camp season, we are spending a little time learning more about the safety practices camps use to support both campers and staff.

Recently, we came across The Safety Navigator, a nonprofit initiative that works alongside camps to provide practical safety resources such as risk assessment tools, emergency action planning guidance, and expert support for camp teams. The platform is free for all camps, with hundreds of camp staff already using its resources.

As parents, initiatives like this help provide additional transparency and confidence when evaluating camp programs. We are simply trying to better understand how camps approach safety planning and continuous improvement.

If you're open to sharing, we would love to learn:

- Whether [Camp name] is currently part of The Safety Navigator community
- Whether your team uses any tools or frameworks for safety planning that you could share, such as completing risk assessments or having a documented Emergency Action Plan
- How your team approaches continuous improvement around safety, preparedness, and staff training

If it's easier, we would also be happy to schedule a short call to learn more about how your team approaches safety at camp, or alternatively, we can send a list of questions through email.

Please know this question comes from a place of appreciation for the work you do every day to create a safe and positive environment for our children.

Thank you for taking the time to share more about your approach. We are grateful for the leadership you provide to the camp community.

Warm regards,
[Parent name]
[Child/Camper Name(s), if desired]