



# CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT



## Safety should be paramount in choosing a camp

**By Jane Sutter**

Although summertime may seem far away during Rochester winters, it's not too early for parents to start thinking about sending their children to camp.

Many camps open registration in January, and spots can fill up quickly. While choosing a camp that has activities that align with a child's interests is a key goal, parents also should evaluate a camp with safety top of mind. That topic of safety came to the forefront in July 2025, when a flash flood in Central Texas killed 25 campers and two counselors at Camp Mystic.

So how should parents go about evaluating how safe is a camp? The New York State Department of Health regulates children's camps, both overnight camps and day camps. Those camps need a permit to operate legally, and they must be in com-

pliance with the state sanitary code. New York State defines an overnight camp as a camp where a child spends more than 48 hours.

"New York State has some of the toughest regulations around what we call children's camps," stated John Quinlivan, who has been executive director and CEO of Camp Stella Maris on Conesus Lake since 2008. Quinlivan noted that there is a distinction between what's termed a "children's camp" versus other types of activities that might label themselves as a camp, such as a sports camp, which is not regulated by the state.

Quinlivan is active in the American Camping Association, the only national accrediting body for camps of various types. In addition to being active in upstate New York, Quinlivan serves on national com-

mittees and periodically visits camps to evaluate them as part of the accreditation process. ACA standards focus on health, safety and risk management. Camp Stella Maris is ACA accredited.

### Staff qualifications

"One of the most important things when deciding whether to send your kid to camp is (finding out) how are their staff chosen," Quinlivan said. ACA requires that camps have a strict hiring process. At Camp Stella Maris, that includes applicants submitting to a criminal background check, supplying three references (which are checked by CSM staff) and going through an interview.

The age of the staff makes a difference when it comes to trustworthiness, Quin-

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livan said. Regulated camps have age requirements while unregulated camps do not. An unregulated camp might allow a 14-year-old to be a counselor, Quinlivan said. At Camp Stella Maris, the minimum age for a camp counselor is 16 years old for day camp and 17 for overnight camp. Only a certain number of staff can be under age 18. Quinlivan said most staffers are 18 years or older. As Camp Stella Maris enters its 100th summer, Quinlivan is proud of the fact that “a lot of our staff are second and third generation staff members.” The ratio of counselors to kids is also something that parents should check on, Quinlivan said. For regulated camps, the ratio is one counselor per eight children for younger kids, and one counselor per 10 children for older kids. Quinlivan said that CSM has two counselors with a group of kids at all times. Quinlivan also suggested that if parents are sending their kids to an unregulated camp, they ask questions such as “What does supervision look like in the locker room?” Parents should think about what’s going on when kids are at their most vulnerable time. Usually for a program at CSM, one counselor runs the activity while another watches the kids. Certain activities, such as archery, will have more counselors involved. “Our goal is to teach the kids independence, so the kids don’t generally know that we have such eyes on them. We want them to be able to make their own decisions and to get from here to there ... but we are working on behalf of the parents, and we are there in place of the parents at that moment, so it’s our job to make sure the kids are being monitored and are being kept safe.”

## **Safety and security at camp**

Unfortunately, with shootings at schools and other places becoming more commonplace, parents undoubtedly want to make sure a camp is equipped to both prevent and deal with the unthinkable. Quinlivan said he gets questioned “a lot” about security. Kids learn about the emergency safety plan if someone wants to do harm at the camp, Quinlivan said. “This generation practices it all the time in school and knows what to do. We’re lucky that we can send everybody into the woods and run.” So in that regard, not having a fence is advantageous, Quinlivan said. “We are fortunate where we are, in a rural community. So we don’t have a fence around our property, and most camps

## **Questions for parents to ask camp directors:**

1. What is the camp’s philosophy and emphasis?
2. What is the camp director’s background?
3. What training do counselors receive?
4. What is the counselor to camper ratio?
5. What are the ages of counselors?
6. What are the desired qualities in camp staff?
7. What percentage of counselors returned from last year?
8. How are behavioral and disciplinary problems handled?
9. How does the camp handle special needs?
10. How does the camp handle adjustment issues?
11. Are references available?
12. How is healthcare delivered?
13. What does the camp require in advance (physicals, immunizations, etc.)?
14. Does the American Camp Association accredit the camp?

*For more information, go to: [How to Choose a Camp: Safety Tips](#) | [American Camp Association](#) and [Choosing a Summer Camp and Preparing Your Child: AAP Safety Tips - Healthy-Children.org](#)*

don’t. We don’t find that it’s appropriate to do. It would be hard to monitor. We don’t like the message that sends.”

Staff also keep an eye out for anyone parking a car and stepping onto the campus. They will immediately ask “how can I help you?” Quinlivan said. The Livingston County Sheriff’s Department checks on the camp frequently and the fire department is only two minutes away. The camp also employs a night watch person to check on things, including making sure kids get to the bathroom and back to their cabin ok. Part of the ACA accreditation requirements is that the camp sends letters to all local officials to let them know when the camp is in session, Quinlivan said.

Camp Stella Maris has emergency action plans for a variety of situations, including fires and tornadoes, Quinlivan said. Drills for both types of situations are conducted. In 2024, when a tornado warning was issued, “we had practiced for it, and everyone knew what to do ... We had 300 kids in our basement (in a designated building) within three minutes,” Quinlivan said. A tornado did touch down in nearby Livonia that day. A safety plan is submitted to the Livingston County Health Department every year.

## **Health care at camp**

In choosing a camp, parents also should think about what happens if a child gets sick or has an accident such as breaking a bone.

New York State requires regulated camps to have a health care director, which can be a physician, physician assistant, nurse practitioner, nurse, licensed practical nurse or an EMT. A camp also must have a

written medical plan approved by the local health department.

Camp Stella Maris has a nurse on staff 24-7 who lives on campus and is at the health center from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., Quinlivan said. The camp also has a full-time EMT on site. If a child needs to take regular medication, parents check that medication in at the health center on Sunday when they drop off the child. The child then goes to the health center when it’s time to take the medication and the nurse makes sure the child takes it.

If there is an illness or an accident that requires going to an urgent care facility, Quinlivan said, “We’ll partner with the parents and decide what to do.” That could mean having two staff members take the child in a camp van to meet the parents. Depending on the treatment, if a doctor clears the child, he or she can return to camp to finish the session, Quinlivan said.

## **Access to electronic devices**

As they look at the various camp options, parents should also consider the issue of their child’s internet access when they are not available to monitor it. “We have chosen not to allow internet devices on camp,” Quinlivan said. That means no cell phones, no smart watches, no music devices that can connect to the internet. “We feel strongly that kids need a break from that ... One of the reasons that parents send their kids to our camp is because of that policy. They want their kids off social media for that week.”

He often sees kids signing off their devices in the parking lot when they arrive at

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camp. "For many of them, it's one of the few weeks in their life when they are playing outdoors all week long. They are busy doing things with friends that they've made and fun stuff ... Our days are pretty programmed and it's all about letting the kids be kids."

Quinlivan acknowledges that for parents who are used to checking in frequently with their kids, not knowing what their kids are doing can be a challenge. "We take a lot of photos of campers, and we post them every day. We take 200 to 300 photos a day and videos and we post them" on the camp's parent portal. Thanks to an app that uses facial recognition, it's easy for parents to spot a photo of their child.

"I always tell parents, 'If you haven't heard from us, your kid is doing great,'" Quinlivan said.

If for some reason a child is missing being home a lot (Quinlivan doesn't use the term "homesick"), a counselor will call the parents to strategize on tactics. Perhaps a child likes to have a story read to them at night, or they want their favorite cuddly toy or they need music to calm them before bed. The staff can make that happen, Quinlivan said.

### Concerns about bullying

A good question for parents to ask when reviewing camp options is how the counselors handle bullying. At Camp Stella Maris, the process called "restorative justice" is used, Quinlivan said. "We have ears and eyes on kids all the time so most of the time we're going to hear it (bullying) pretty quickly. It's a great opportunity instead of just yelling at a kid for doing that, to get the kids together and talk about why it happened, and how we're going to make sure it doesn't happen again. We hate sending kids home for behavior (problems) ... These are young kids and they deserve every chance we can give them to do well."



Quinlivan noted that at CSM, there are division directors and many of them are studying to be nurses, social workers or educators. The division directors oversee four to five cabins of kids, and their job is to support the counselors. Every summer, the camp hires two school counselors who guide the division directors.

Since the COVID pandemic and lockdown happened, challenging behavior issues have emerged, and that has been a frequent topic at conferences of camp directors, Quinlivan said. With funds from the Lilly Foundation, the ACA is offering grants to help camps implement character development programs. CMS has applied for a grant.

### Touring a camp

"One of most important things a parent can do with their kid when they are thinking about camp is to go and visit that camp," Quinlivan stated. This is especially important for kids who are attending an overnight camp for the first time. "Kids are anxious — what's it going to be like to sleep in a cabin, where's the bathroom, all those things."

Camps will host open houses, too. "The more you can do with your camper to

get them acclimated to what it's going to be like, the more successful they will be," Quinlivan said.

While camp websites offer FAQ's and videos, there is nothing like being on site to see the accommodations. Camp Stella Maris doesn't have a pool, so kids take their swimming test in Conesus Lake. That means waves and a sandy bottom, which a child may have not experienced. Still, they adjust. Three hundred kids and 100 staff go down to the lake for two hours every afternoon. Campers learn how to swim in the lake; they play games. "It's just a big, giant beach party down there every day," Quinlivan said.

### How camping changes a child

A great thing about any overnight camp is seeing the growth in the kids, Quinlivan said. He sees the job of the camp as giving kids responsibility and independence, empowering them to do all kinds of things including cleaning up their messes and putting dishes away. "Our job, at least for a week, is to give those kids that type of independence and responsibility, the ability to make friends."

He's seen kids who are very nervous the first day of camp be transformed in a positive way by the end of the week. "I hear from so many parents, 'What did you do to my child? They are totally different.' ... The day parents come to pick them up, (campers) don't want to leave (their new friends); they're all crying," Quinlivan said, smiling at the memory, knowing that many of these kids are making life-long friendships at camp.

*Jane Sutter is a Rochester-area freelance writer.*

## NY State Requirements:

*To learn about the state's requirements for regulated camps, go here: [health.ny.gov/publications/3601/index.htm](https://health.ny.gov/publications/3601/index.htm) You can also contact your local county health department for information about a specific camp.*

## How to check a camp's accreditation:

*You can verify the accreditation status of any camp by going to American Camp Association | Summer camp and youth development or calling 1-800-428-CAMP.*

# Watch for These Warning Signs of Abuse in Minors

No longer wants to see a **particular person** they had been close to

Declining **academic** performance

Tries to hide use of **technology**

No longer interested in **activities** they used to enjoy

Changes in **personality**

Demonstrates **aggressive behavior** or constantly angry

Tries to get minors **alone**



Commits physical and emotional **boundary violations**

**Withdraws** from family or friends

Keeps **secrets** with minors

Gives lavish **gifts** to minors

Allows or encourages minors to **break laws** or rules

Is overly interested in **spending time** with minors

Has **inappropriate** or suggestive conversations with minors

Does not believe the **rules** apply to them (or, does not follow rules or protocols)

Takes **photos** without approval, or asks minors to send them photos

## ... and These Warning Signs of Perpetrators



ROMAN CATHOLIC  
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

## Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:

Tammy Sylvester,  
Diocesan Coordinator  
of Safe Environment Education  
and Compliance,  
585-328-3228  
or [Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org](mailto:Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org).

*Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.*

*To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator:*

Deborah Housel  
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;  
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,  
ext. 1555  
[victimassistance@dor.org](mailto:victimassistance@dor.org).

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## ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

### ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

#### CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

##### Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>

*PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.*

##### NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>

*A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.*

### FOR PARENTS:

#### Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>

*A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education*

#### Darkness to Light organization:

[www.d2l.org](http://www.d2l.org)

*Darkness to Light is a non-profit committed to empowering adults to prevent child sexual abuse.*

#### Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

#### iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>

*Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies*

### LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

#### Bivona Child Advocacy Center

(Monroe, Wayne counties):

[www.BivonaCAC.org](http://www.BivonaCAC.org)  
585-935-7800

#### Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:

607-737-8449  
[www.chemungcounty.com](http://www.chemungcounty.com)

#### Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:

315-253-9795  
[www.cacofcayugacounty.org](http://www.cacofcayugacounty.org)

#### Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program

(Ontario County):  
[www.cacfingerlakes.org](http://www.cacfingerlakes.org)  
315-548-3232

#### STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:

[www.sthcs.org](http://www.sthcs.org)  
716-372-8532

**NYS State Central Registry**  
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):  
1-800-342-3720

**NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)**  
866-313-3013

**Tompkins County Advocacy Center:**  
[www.theadvocacycenter.org](http://www.theadvocacycenter.org)  
607-277-3203

**Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:**  
585-786-8846

**Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:**  
315-531-3417, Ext. 6