



Post Your Problems

Check out kids camps carefully

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By [Larry Walsh](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A single mother of a special needs child has a problem she wanted to share to help others avoid what happened to her daughter.

The mother sent her 12-year-old mentally challenged daughter, who has the mental ability of a 6-year-old, to a residential summer camp for a week.

All appeared to be going well until a counselor called to report that her daughter had been sexually assaulted by a 19-year-old girl who has the mental capacity of an 8-year-old.

The parents drove to the camp and, while they were waiting for police to arrive, the mother said she learned for the first time that counselors didn't sleep in the same room with the campers, who have multiple disabilities and range in age from 5 to 20. She said she was told counselors enter the room to check on the campers "every 20-30 minutes."

The mother said the counselor apologized and said "nothing like this had ever happened before."

A local police officer and a state police trooper interviewed the 19-year-old suspect. Although she initially denied doing anything wrong, then gave the officers "two or three different stories," she admitted the sexual assault. The local officer also said in his report that he had been told the 19-year-old had been involved in an "incident" at another camp.

After reviewing the case, the local district attorney's office determined that the 19-year-old "was not competent to be charged with a crime" and declined to prosecute. It did, however, direct the girl's parents "to seek some type of sexual touching counseling" for their daughter. The parents agreed to do so.

Asked if she agreed with the decision not to prosecute, the mother of the 12-year-old answered, "Yes and no."

"The reason I say that is because the 19-year-old knew that what she had done was wrong. She said my daughter would never be allowed to go to camp again if she told anyone what had happened to her."

"Before this happened, my daughter was very clingy, very friendly and very outgoing with people. She was very close to my mother. That has all changed. She wants nothing to do with my mother and is actually mean to her."

"She has withdrawn from family and peers. I am unable to brush her hair, help her with her feminine requirements or anything else. She refuses to let me touch her."

"Last year at school, I rarely received a complaint about her behavior. This year, she has been very defiant, stubborn and lacks motivation. This is what the teacher is telling me."

So what should parents of special needs youngsters do to determine which summer camp is best for their children?

"Obtain as much information about the program as you can, including the population it serves, the staff to child ratio, and how long it has been in operation," said Karen Fleiss, assistant professor of child and adolescent psychiatry, clinical director of the New York University Child Study Center Long Island Campus, and co-director of the Summer Program for Kids.

"In addition to doing the basic research, visit the camp while it is in session and meet with the director personally to speak about your child and his/her issues in order to feel comfortable with your choice," she said.

"Although children are unique and have varying needs, speaking to the parent of a child who attended the camp can be

extremely helpful in determining if the program is a good fit for your child."

There are more camp choices now than at any other time for kids with special needs, according to KidsHealth.org, the Web site of the Nemours Foundation (www.Nemours.org).

"A good way to begin looking for a camp is to make several lists that establish the basics you're looking for -- a list of goals, a list of caretaking priorities and a list of other considerations, such as cost," it said.

The American Camp Association has an online listing of special-needs camps that's broken down by the types of camps, cost, length of stay, state and region, and campers' ages.

The Web site, www.acacamps.org, also has general and age-appropriate advice for parents.

Asked what advice she would offer to the parents of special needs children before sending them off to camp, the mother said she would urge them "to ask about the sleeping arrangements, ask to see the sleeping areas, ask if the counselors sleep in the same room as the children. Are there surveillance cameras or monitors? How often do they check on the children?"

"I feel that the camps should be asking more questions and doing a little more research into each child's background. For instance, check with other camps the child has attended. I can't tell you how careful you must really be.

"As parents, we trust that our children are in good hands when we take them to these places. They are there to have a good time and laugh and play and make some good memories. I'm sure this will be a nightmare that neither my daughter nor I will ever forget."

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