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## Using Risk Management Tools and Training to Protect Youth and Adults in Overnight Settings

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## Using Risk Management Tools and Training to Protect Youth and Adults in Overnight Settings

### Abstract

Providing a safe environment for youth is an essential element for effective youth development programs. This article describes the Louisiana 4-H Youth Development Program's efforts in attaining this essential element through the Overnight Chaperone Program. Derived from a mixed-model, 33-item survey, results indicate that 98% of program participants gained information on how to create a positive environment for youth. Of those, only 31% indicated that they had received any related training previously. Multi-faceted approaches that include screening and training are critical to providing safe environments for youth as well as increasing satisfaction among volunteers.

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## Introduction

Community youth organizations are focused on helping youth grow up while developing their capacities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). The National 4-H Impact Design team (2001) reviewed basic and applied research on the characteristics of effective youth programs and found that providing a safe environment was one of the eight elements essential for effective youth development programs. A safe environment is one where youth do not fear physical or emotional harm while participating in the youth development experience, whether it is from the learning environment, from adults, from their contemporaries, or from spectators.

In providing safe environments, youth organizations have the responsibility to protect youth and adults involved in their programs. In the past 25 years, the child welfare field in North America has seen an evolution from a concern with the battered baby syndrome to physical child abuse to sexual child abuse to recently a major concern with child protection. An increasing emphasis on the determination of the definition of risk was a major initiative during the decade of the 1990's (Anglin, 2002; Lachman & Poblete, 2002).

According to the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information System (2004), no matter how the abuse occurs, the perpetrators are the individuals responsible for the care and supervision of their victims. The victimization of children younger than 12 appears to differ from

that of older youth. Young children are much more likely to be abused by a family member, while perpetrators of adolescents are more likely to be acquaintances (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000). Lauritsen (2004) found that younger and older adolescents experience similar levels of stranger abuse.

Given the fact that 82% of abuse involving youth, ages 12 to 17, occurs outside the child's home (Lauritsen, 2004), youth organizations must understand the potential risk within the organization's boundaries. Due to the concern for managing risk and in response to the demands of legislation (the courts and the public), community youth organizations are under a microscope to exercise a higher degree of care for enhanced predictability and prevention of abuse to any child while participating in youth organization functions (Anglin, 2002).

As a vital part of a community organization's delivery team, volunteers and staff have the potential to profoundly affect the well-being of children. A wide variety of risk management strategies can be employed to protect youth and adults from abuse.

Once narrowly conceptualized as a human resource management process, screening may be the most significant risk management technique. The use of screening tools such as reference checks, interviews, and criminal background checks in youth organizations are extremely important in identifying individuals who are appropriate role models and in protecting an increasingly vulnerable population from harm (Graff, 2000; McNeely, Schmiesing, King, & Kleon, 2002).

In addition to screening, orientation and training are powerful tools to aid volunteers and staff in gaining knowledge regarding child protection and providing safe, positive environments (Boffa & Armitage, 1999; Culp et al., 2005; DePanfilis, 1996; McNeely, Schmiesing, King, & Kleon, 2002). Position descriptions and standards of behavior are used to help staff and volunteers understand their responsibilities and behavioral expectations (Childhope Protection Policy, 2004; McNeely et al., 2002).

According to a National Urban Institute Study designed to determine the volunteer management capacity in America's charities and congregations, few of these risk management practices are adopted to a large degree. Only 29% of congregations and 45% of charities use screening procedures to a large degree in order to identify suitable volunteers. When it came to written policies and job descriptions, 23% of congregations and 44% of non-profits exercised these volunteer management tools to a large degree. Only 16% of congregations and 25% of charities offered training and professional development opportunities to a large degree (Hager, 2004). Organizations must take the appropriate steps to ensure that paid and volunteer staffs do not harm youth program participants, the community, the organization or themselves (Campbell, Royce, Arosemena, Dwyer-Morgan, & King, 2002; Graff, 2000; Kerka, 2003; Schmiesing & Henderson, 2001).

## **Program Objectives and Description**

In 2004, the Louisiana 4-H Youth Development Program formed a risk management team of field faculty, volunteers, and state experts in the areas of risk management, youth development, and human resource development to study the top risk management concerns for the state. Youth Protection was identified as the top priority. Youth Protection is a set of standards, guidelines, and trainings used to create a positive environment by eliminating opportunities for the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse or acts of negligence against youth members. In addressing youth protection, an Overnight Chaperone Program was developed with the following objectives.

1. Program participants will learn to create a safe positive environment for youth in overnight settings.
2. Program participants will be provided with tools to create positive experiences for youth in overnight settings.

Volunteers in overnight chaperone roles play a critical role in supporting developmentally appropriate environments for youth. As they serve as positive role models, overnight chaperones help develop life skills and character traits in youth. In order to provide a safe, positive environment, the Overnight Chaperone Program provides paid and unpaid staff with the knowledge and tools necessary to lead a positive, successful overnight situation. The Overnight Chaperone Program has four components.

- A background screening process ensures that adults are free from background concerns that might affect their ability to provide a safe environment for youth. The organization used a professional screening company that conducted national criminal and sexual predator background checks on volunteer applicants. After 5 years, a random sample of overnight chaperones will be re-screened.
- A 3-hour training covers youth development principles, discipline, youth and adult protection, health and safety, and crisis management. These trainings were delivered by 4-H youth

development professionals who have completed a 3-hour train-the-trainer program in the overnight chaperone procedures. The trainings are offered on parish, regional, and state levels. Group trainings are recommended; however, individual trainings are conducted on an as-needed basis. It is suggested that the trainings be conducted at least 1 month prior to the volunteer serving in the overnight role.

- A job description ensures that volunteers understand their responsibilities.
- A code of conduct form reinforces that volunteers understand the behavioral expectations of them in their roles as overnight chaperones.

## Program Evaluation

Based on the objectives of the Overnight Chaperone Program, a survey was developed and reviewed by a panel of experts including an evaluation specialist and several youth development specialists and 4-H agents. Approximately 4 weeks following the Overnight Chaperone Training Program, participants were sent the survey designed to assess the program participant's knowledge and perceptions of the effectiveness and demographics. The survey was sent to all 734 participants. Two hundred fifty-four participants returned usable surveys, for a 35% response rate. The authors constructed a survey that consisted of Likert-type scale items and open-ended questions. After data collection, a Cronbach's alpha test was run on all of the Likert-type scale items to determine the reliability of the instrument. The Cronbach alpha was determined to be 0.82. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (1993), reliability coefficients of .70 or higher are acceptable for research purposes.

## Findings

### Demographics

A majority of the respondents (80%) indicated they were female, while 20% were male. The largest group of respondents indicated their race was white (90%), and only 5% indicated they were African American, with American Indian or Hispanic accounting for 1% each. The largest percentage of the respondents was in the age range of 36 to 45 (39%). The next highest age category reported was 46 to 55 years of age (28%). Only 2% reported being over 65 years of age. Participants were asked how many years they had been a 4-H volunteer. Volunteers ranged in years of service from 1 to 40. Thirty percent had been a volunteer 1 year or less, while 5% indicated they had been a 4-H volunteer 25 years or more.

### Program Impact

As a result of the Overnight Chaperone Program, 98% of the participants gained knowledge on how to create a positive environment for youth. Ninety-four percent felt more comfortable handling discipline problems. Regarding child abuse, 94% of participants increased both their knowledge of the signs of child abuse and the types of child abuse. In promoting safe environments, 97% of the participants increased their understanding of how to maintain safe environments for youth, while 93% increased their understanding of how to protect adults in overnight situations. Ninety-five percent of participants were more aware of health and safety considerations in overnight settings. In terms of handling critical situations, 94% felt more comfortable handling crisis situations, while 93% felt more prepared to handle emergency situations. Table 1 illustrates the participants' perception of the information gained from the Overnight Chaperone Training.

**Table 1.**  
Participants' Perception of the Information Gained from the Overnight Chaperone Program

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Gained info on how to create a positive youth environment.		1%		39%	60%	4.59
Feel more comfortable handling discipline problems.	1%	2%	2%	45%	50%	4.47
Increased my knowledge of the signs of child abuse.		1%	4%	37%	58%	4.53
Increased my knowledge of the types of child abuse.		1%	4%	37%	58%	4.53
Increased my	1%	1%	1%	41%	56%	4.55

understanding on how to maintain safe environments for youth.						
Increased my understanding on how to protect adults in overnight settings.		2%	3%	39%	56%	4.53
Am more aware of health and safety considerations in overnight settings.		2%	2%	40%	56%	4.54
Feel more prepared to handle crisis situations.		2%	3%	42%	53%	4.50
Am more prepared to handle emergency situations.		2%	3%	41%	54%	4.50
<i>Note.</i> N=254 *Scale items: 1-Strongly Disagree; 2-Disagree; 3-Not Sure; 4-Agree; 5-Strongly Agree						

## Knowledge Gains

A part of the questionnaire was designed to test the retention of the knowledge gained during class 1 month following the training. When it came to discipline, 98% understood that rules should be enforceable and limited, and that they should set an expectation for behavior, while 83% understood that children misbehave because they want power, attention, or revenge and feel inadequate. In adult protection, 95% of the participants understood that they should avoid any one-on-one contact with youth. With child protection, 93% of the participants knew that empty facial expressions, impaired sense of self and conduct disorders were signs of emotional abuse. In dealing with medical situations, 99% of the participants knew that all emergency actions and medical treatment should be kept in a medical log, while 89% identified the role of all non-medically trained personnel was to help clear the area when an emergency occurs.

## Prior Training

The majority of respondents had not received any training on the topic areas covered within the Overnight Chaperone Program. Just under one-third (31%) of the volunteers who participated in the Overnight Chaperone Program received training on related topics prior to the Overnight Chaperone training. Most of the individuals who had participated in prior training programs did so with Boy Scouts, religious organizations, or school systems.

Youth protection was the topic in which most of the volunteers (28%) had prior training in, compared to crisis management (22%), the topic in which the fewest volunteers had prior training. In terms of training time as measured in minutes, participants received the most training hours in youth protection (M=106) and the least number of training hours in adult protection (M=76). Training in child guidance received the lowest mode (60 minutes) for training with the largest range (15-780 minutes). Table 2 illustrates the training topic with the percentage of participants who indicated that they received along with the mean and range of minutes they spent in training.

**Table 2.**

Percentage, Mean, and Range of Prior Training by Participants

Topic Training	Percentage Who Received Training	Mean in Minutes	Range in Minutes
Youth Protection	28%	106	10-590
Health and Safety	25%	84	10-600
Adult Protection	24%	76	5-600
Child Guidance	24%	99	10-780
Handling Emergencies	24%	90	10-600
Crisis Management	22%	93	10-600

## Qualitative Themes

Researchers gleaned themes from the open-ended questions denoting that participants better understood expectations of the volunteer position, gained new insights, were better prepared for their overnight chaperone role, could apply the information to other settings, and supported organizational confidence.

The Overnight Chaperone Program served to clarify the expectations for the overnight chaperone role as illustrated by this statement below: "I have a better understanding of what is asked of me as a volunteer."

Volunteers reported a theme relating better preparation to take on the role of an overnight chaperone as described in the following statements.

- "Answered all my questions."
- "The training prepared me to handle any situation that may occur."
- "Learned much more to help me while chaperoning."
- "I feel like I can handle all situations better."
- "The training covered every situation you can come into on an overnight trip with children."

Through the following statements, Overnight Chaperone Program volunteers indicated the theme of an increased awareness of new situations that might arise during the overnight experience.

- "Some things you really never think about, you just take it for granted that it may be OK."
- "Training sessions are important as they may enlighten someone to situations or rules they may not be familiar with."
- "Really opened my eyes to a lot of things I never considered."

Overnight chaperone volunteers identified a new insights theme gained as a result of the program.

- "Training sessions are important as they may enlighten someone to situations or rules they may not be familiar with."
- "As an older adult whose children are grown and gone, this training gave me a new insight into today's youth."
- "I appreciate the fact that it went beyond the Diocesan training I received and discussed why children misbehave and how we can avoid some situations."
- "It familiarized myself with today's problems."

Participants indicated that they could apply the information in other settings.

- "Very informative and educational - taught me lessons to use in everyday situations."
- "I enjoyed clarifying problems and how to solve certain situations."

Finally, the comments supported the 4-H organization for implementing risk management tools through the Overnight Chaperone Program.

- "It is a shame we have to go through this because our nation has dropped so morally and sue-happy. But it is good that you are adapting with it."
- "I trusted 4-H before&#160;"now I know why!"
- "I think this training is a plus for 4-H and should have been started years ago."
- "I think its good policy especially for new volunteers coming into the program that an agent may use and not fully know."
- "I understand the importance of it and appreciate the effort."

## Recommendations and Conclusions

While some youth development organizations and professionals are hesitant to implement risk management tools due to concern over organizational culture issues, the results of our evaluation indicate that it is an expectation based on societal issues. With the changes in society, volunteers and parents of participants realize that employing risk management tools and training such as those offered as part of the Overnight Chaperone Program are a necessary step in ensuring a safe environment for the youth as well as the adults who work with them. Community youth organizations have a responsibility and obligation to provide safe environments for the vulnerable audiences they serve. The volunteers valued being part of an organization that implemented these risk management practices.

Preparation for volunteers through such avenues as orientation, position descriptions, team building activities, and careful screening of adults helps support a safe, positive environment for youth and adults. Youth development professionals have an obligation to screen, prepare, teach, and support volunteers who are in overnight and other youth guidance settings. It is crucial that volunteers understand what is expected of them in this type of role and are prepared to handle the responsibilities that come along with this role. While job descriptions are very helpful in communicating expectations, volunteers need training and an open dialogue in order to facilitate a positive experience for all involved.

With less than 1/3 of the volunteers participating in some type of training, the evaluation results point to a need for training. Both the quantitative and qualitative data reinforce that this training should be comprehensive in scope and duration. An essential part of a risk management program is high quality, experiential training with application exercises.

When it comes to the topics covered during the training, the variety of training topics appear to be supportive of preparation for the responsibilities and experiences related to an overnight situation involving youth. In our evaluation, findings indicate that other youth organizations focused more of their efforts on youth protection, while adult protection received the least amount of training minutes. Child guidance was the topic that had the lowest occurring mode in minutes of training. The fewest volunteers had prior training in crisis management. This data supports a variety of topics that should be taught as part of the Overnight Chaperone Program. Relevant trainings help adults understand why risk management is important and how they can control the risks associated with community youth development programs.

Through the Overnight Chaperone Program, volunteers reported that they gained information about how to create a positive youth environment. These volunteers reported increases in their understanding of how to maintain safe environments for youth while protecting adults in overnight settings. They made knowledge gains in types and signs of child abuse. Overnight chaperones were made aware of health and safety considerations in overnight settings along with feeling more prepared to handle emergency and crisis situations.

The results of our evaluation support that risk management tools and training to protect youth and adults in overnight settings make a positive difference. In order to do so, youth organizations must continue to employ multi-faceted child protection strategies that identify and insure individuals who are positive role models for youth. A critical partner to screening in risk management training should be to prepare participants for the expectations of the role, enhance their ability to work positively with youth, and help them perform in emergency situations. By acknowledging and addressing the risks involved within youth development programs, youth development organizations can play a critical role in society in not only facilitating the positive development of youth but also increasing the personal pleasure of the volunteer themselves.

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