Camper-to-Staff Ratios (and Exceptions)

In-Camp Ratios
Specific camper-to-counselor ratios should be set (see ACA's recommended camper supervision ratios) with your camp's needs in mind. Ratios should be determined based on the age and ability of campers as well as your camp's layout and topography. Consider when campers must be with counselors (e.g., at activity areas or when in the cabin) and when it might be okay for them to travel with just a buddy (e.g., when going to the bathroom if it is in eyesight of the counselor, or perhaps farther if the campers are older). Keep in mind that other staff members in a specific area can be held accountable for more than just the campers in their immediate vicinity. For example, some camps have a low-key period during the day where the entire camp is given freedom to travel between activities in a controlled, well-defined area. In this situation, staff members might be assigned to provide complete coverage throughout the area, around its perimeter, and, if necessary, at specific activities and off-limits areas. At all times, proper general supervision should be maintained and monitored by supervisors who roam the area and monitor supervision.

If you have counselors with specific roles, such as group counselors and activity counselors, your staffing needs and supervision ratios may be different than if they perform dual (or more) roles. Also consider what function, if any, your junior counselors or CITs might play.

Be sure to also think about any exceptions to your established ratios. Is it okay for campers to have less supervision during rest hour or bedtime? (Be careful with your answers here. Research has proven that unstructured times like these are actually when most camp injuries occur.) What about during meals or during large-group games and evening activities? Will you have times when campers travel from activity to activity unsupervised? Can you make changes to ensure that campers are always with a counselor? For instance, some camps have a camper-choice activity period, during which campers individually choose where to go. All campers and counselors meet in a central location, and the counselors leading the activities gather their campers and walk them to the activity. They also walk back together at the end of the time period. In such a plan, campers remain constantly supervised, and the camp knows that everyone is where they are supposed to be at all times.

Lastly, address any situations or activities that require a minimum of two counselors. For instance, consider mandating two counselors at activities with higher risk, such as all aquatics, horseback riding, and any challenge course activities that involve elements (high or low), as well as two counselors on all overnight activities and trips, including at least one counselor of the same sex as the attending campers. When setting your camp's staffing requirements, you may also want to encourage a minimum of two counselors for any situation or conversation with a camper that could be perceived as uncomfortable or sensitive, such as changing time in the locker room or gathering information about an allegation against another camper or a staff member.

Does the camp require and/or advise rental groups that:
HR.8.1 Ratios of staff who are on duty with campers in units or living groups and in general camp activities should meet the following minimums?

Camper Age	Number Staff	Overnight Campers	Day-only Campers
5 years and younger	1	5	6
6–8 years	1	6	8
9–14 years	1	8	10
15-18 years	1	10	12

HR.8.2 At least 80 percent (100 percent for camps primarily serving persons with special needs) of the staff are eighteen (18) years of age or older?

HR.8.3 All staff is at least sixteen (16) years of age and at least two (2) years older than the minors with whom they are working?

Out-of-Camp Camper-to-Staff Ratios

When planning for your camp's trips, again consider the age and needs of your campers. The destination will also affect recommended supervision ratios; for instance, your ratios might be very different if you have staff members leading an out-of-camp climbing expedition versus attending the local Renaissance Festival. Be sure to think through possible scenarios at each location before setting your final ratios. How will your counselors keep campers together in crowds? Are aquatics activities part of the outing? That is, do you need to send a lifeguard (or lifeguards) or other staff members with specific training (or first-aid certifications, etc.)? What if a camper doesn't want to participate in a specific activity (like a ride at an amusement park or the planetarium at your local science museum)? Do you have any campers attending who have special needs?

Supervision of Campers, Sensitive Issues, and Boundaries

The following information serves as an example of camper-supervision training that goes beyond basic staff-to-camper ratios. These paragraphs and the subsequent outlines cover staff responsibilities in supervision, the camp's expectations of staff and campers, and sensitive issues such as child abuse and being a mandated reporter, bullying, and personal boundaries.

In your camp's staff orientation, be sure to highlight any areas where new staff may need additional guidance. Discuss appropriate language and behavior with campers (and with each other). Address how they can protect themselves from false accusations (and from making campers uncomfortable). Outline what to do if they find themselves in an uncomfortable position, and remind them of where to go when they need help (and that its okay). Another helpful resource for staff is the American Camp Association's e-Institute course Camp Is for the Camper at www.ACAcamps.org/einstitute/camper, which can be taken online prior to arriving to camp.

Being a camp counselor is a job. It's a fun job, but it is still a job. Your primary duty in this position is to ensure the safety and well-being of the campers in your care. To this end, think of your campers first in every decision that you make. You should not be worrying about your next break or what you're going to do this weekend with your friends. Keep track of your campers. You should check attendance every time your group leaves or enters a building, at the beginning and end of every activity period, and every time you blink. You should check attendance constantly. It should haunt you in your sleep. Seriously, keeping attendance is the best way to keep your campers safe. If you know where a camper is, you're better able to anticipate and prevent accidents. Every camper should be accounted for at all times—including when campers are traveling to and from the bathroom and to and from elective activities. It's never okay for a camper to be "somebody else's problem." If you see a camper who's not accompanied by a counselor, it's your duty to stop her and find out where she's going.

Because some children (and some adults) are not good at saying when they feel uncomfortable (they may be embarrassed or think it's not the cool thing to say), it is important to honor everyone's personal space. This space includes their individual belongings (including beds at resident camp) as well as their bodies. Everyone in the group should practice asking to sit next to someone or to borrow something. In addition, you, as the counselor, need to be very aware of what you do and say regarding campers' bodies, which includes commenting about

Check this resource Keeping Children and Families Safe Act. A PDF is available that may also be helpful to your program. Go to www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/educator/educator.pdf