The American Camp Association

VISION: Enriching Lives, Changing the World

MISSION: The mission of the American Camp Association is enriching the lives of children, youth and adults through the camp experience.

The American Camp Association (ACA) is a community of camp professionals dedicated to ensuring the high quality of camp programs; fostering a greater public understanding of and support for the value of the camp experience; and expanding the number of children, youth, and adults of all social, cultural, and economic groups who participate in the camp experience. Established in 1910, ACA operates as a private, nonprofit, educational organization with members in all 50 states and several foreign countries. Its members represent a diverse constituency of camp owners and directors, executives, educators, clergy, business people, consultants, camp and organization staff members, volunteers, students, retirees, and other individuals associated with the operation of camps for children and adults.

ACA provides professional development services including educational programs, a robust website, online tools and templates, conferences, and accreditation assistance and expertise; networking opportunities; monitoring of legislation at the federal and state levels; Camping Magazine; public relations efforts; and an online bookstore providing educational resources related to camping, conferencing, outdoor education, and youth development. ACA also serves as a resource to state and federal agencies associated with camps and youth development and to colleges and universities in the fields of outdoor education and recreation.

The ACA is divided into 23 geographic areas called “local offices.” These local offices are instrumental to program delivery, including the ACA accreditation program. Local and national officers and leaders are volunteers and serve without pay. ACA is supported primarily by the dues and contributions of its members, while other support comes from conference fees, the sale of publications, project grants, and fees for services.

ACA’s distinctive programs and diverse membership provides children and adults with the opportunity to learn powerful lessons in community, character-building, skills development, and healthy living. As a leading authority in youth development, ACA works to preserve, promote, and improve the camp experience.

The Accreditation Program of the American Camp Association

Purpose and Value
The American Camp Association is the only nationwide accrediting organization for all types and designs of organized camps. ACA standards focus on health, safety, and risk management practices.

The primary purpose of the ACA accreditation program is to educate camp owners and directors about the administration of key aspects of camp operation, particularly those related to program quality and the health and safety of campers and staff members. ACA standards establish guidelines for designing and implementing policies, procedures, and practices. The camp is then responsible for implementing those policies and ensuring they are followed. A
second purpose of ACA accreditation is to assist the public in selecting camps that meet industry-accepted and government-recognized standards.

Accreditation indicates to the public that the camp administration has voluntarily allowed a peer review process in which its practices are compared to standards established by professionals and authoritative sources associated with the camp industry. At least once every five years, an outside team of trained volunteers (often camp professionals) visits the camp to verify compliance with the standards. During non-visit years, a camp is required to complete an Annual Accreditation Report documenting compliance.

ACA standards do not require all programs to look alike. The ACA accreditation program serves a broad range of facilities and programs: both day and resident, some primitive, some rustic, others highly developed.

As the only recognized accrediting body for the camp experience in the United States, ACA accredits approximately 2,400 diverse camps nationally. ACA Accreditation serves as an assurance to families that a camp cares enough to submit to a transparent, thorough review of its entire operation. The goal is to provide parents with as much information as possible about the camp, offering reassurance to support their respective camp choice. The camp’s voluntary participation in the ACA’s professional development and accreditation process demonstrates their commitment to providing parents and children with the best possible camp experience.

**Development and Administration of ACA Standards: History**

Since the formation of the Camp Directors’ Association in 1910 (now the American Camp Association), the leadership of organized camping in the United States has directed many of its efforts toward health and safety concerns affecting participants at camp. Following mergers with regional and specialized camping organizations, the name “American Camping Association” was adopted in 1935. In this same year, a listing called “Suggested Tentative Standards” was adopted. These standards were in addition to those being developed independently by individual agencies such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. (GSUSA), and the Boy Scouts of America (BSA).

In 1940, the executive committee of ACA decided that the existing formulations of standards should be assembled, examined, and worked into a composite form to represent a consensus of the camp movement. Grants from the Kellogg and Chrysler Foundations enabled this project to go forward and in 1948, the first set of camp standards was officially adopted at ACA’s national convention.

Since the first set of standards were officially adopted, various collaborations with other entities led to revisions of the ACA standards. A few highlights include:

1910  Formation of Camp Director’s Association.
1935  Name “American Camp Association” adopted.
1940  ACA determined to examine and assemble all existing standards into a composite.
1948  First set of camp standards officially adopted.
1950  Personnel and program standards were adopted.
1954  Methods of establishing compliance with the standards were instituted.
1956  Day camp standards were adopted.
1961  Travel and family camp standards were adopted.
1974  With the cooperation of the National Easter Seal Society, standards for the physically disabled were adopted.
1980  With input from state associations for developmentally challenged persons, standards for the developmentally challenged were adopted.
1982  With input from the American Diabetes Association, standards for camps serving persons with diabetes were adopted.
1984  A complete revision of Standards for Camp Accreditation and Site Approval was adopted, consolidating all recently adopted revisions into the core document. The ACA National Standards Board agreed to maintain this set of standards for six years, if possible.
1998  ACA’s Council of Delegates adopted a complete revision and restructuring of camp standards combining the former camp accreditation and site approval standards, requiring all operations occurring on the campsite be included as part of ACA accreditation.
2004  American Camping Association, Inc. began doing business as American Camp Association.
2018  Complete revision and reorganization of standards and adjustments to the accreditation process.

The American Camp Association accreditation program is a national program implemented by local volunteers within the ACA structure. The minimum criteria for accreditation are established and monitored by the National Standards Commission (NSC).

The NSC is a commission of the ACA Board of Directors of the American Camp Association whose key responsibility is oversight of the ACA’s standards program. Its members are selected according to defined criteria and operate within an approved operating code. In the development or revision of standards, the NSC follows an approval process, which includes the involvement of authoritative sources, review and input by internal and external audiences, and a review by legal counsel.

The American Camp Association collaborates with experts from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Red Cross, the Association for Camp Nursing, the Association for Challenge Course Technology, and other authoritative sources and youth-serving agencies to assure that current standards reflect the most up-to-date, research-based practices in the industry.

Content of the Standards
Accredited camps are responsible not only to meet state and local laws, but also to meet the requirements defined by the standards. Those sections of the Accreditation Process Guide includes:

- **Core/Foundational standards** include the goals and outcomes of the camp, respect for campers and staff, camper development, and general condition of facilities.
- **Administrative standards** include policies and procedures for which key administrative staff are responsible for writing and distributing. Topics include transportation, risk
management, emergency procedures, policies related to camp staff and various program areas.

- **Facilities standards** include provision of adequate sleeping quarters in resident camps, safe playgrounds, storage of hazardous materials, and food service.
- **Health and wellness standards** include availability of first-aid equipment and personnel, the use of health histories and health examination forms, and the use of recommended treatment procedures.
- **Staff qualifications, training, and supervision standards** include qualifications for various staff roles, required staff training, supervision of camp staff, and camper-to-staff supervision ratios.
- **Program standards** include safety regulations and procedures for conducting both general and specialized activities, such as aquatics, horseback riding, challenge and adventure activities, and trip and travel camping programs.

**ACCREDITATION PROCESS**

**Eligibility**

The ACA accreditation program is appropriate for a wide variety of camp and out-of-school experiences. ACA accredits programs sponsored by various organizations. These organizations may be agencies, independently owned, faith-based, therapeutic, city or county governments, after school programs, or other organizations. Day camps, resident camps, and travel programs have achieved ACA accreditation status.

Camps and programs may operate on their own property or on property belonging to another entity. Programs taking place in rustic settings, well-developed settings in the woods, at neighborhood community centers, on college campuses, and K-12 schools are all eligible for ACA accreditation.

Operations that lease, rent, or otherwise make available their site and/or facilities to other program operators or sponsors who are responsible for their own staffing and programming may also seek ACA accreditation.

To be eligible for accreditation, an operation must:

- Deliver camp programs and/or provide camp facilities and services for other programs consistent with ACA’s mission of enriching the lives of children, youth, and adults through the camp experience.
- Serve a primary audience with campers five years of age and older. *If the primary audience is children younger than five, accreditation through a different organization is most appropriate.*
- Conduct activities or serve camps and programs that conduct activities which:
  - Utilize trained leadership.
  - Include planned and organized group interaction that contributes to participants’ personal growth, which may include skills development as well as mental, physical, social, and spiritual growth.
  - Provide a sustained experience for participants attending for an established period of time.
Will often include the outdoors and the natural environment as a setting for activities that teach environmental stewardship and recreational skills.

Have a commitment to health, safety, and risk management.

Programs that are only single-day and one-night/two-day programs are not eligible for ACA accreditation.

The ACA accreditation program is designed to be applicable to all types of camps, including:
- Camps that conduct seasonal or year-round operations
- Camps that are faith-based, private for-profit, government, or agency sponsored
- Camps that serve small and large populations
- Camps that operate on school or college campuses
- Camps that use paid and/or volunteer staff
- Camps that are at least three days in length
- Camps that offer day, resident, or trip/travel camp sessions
- Camps that provide facilities and services to groups
- Camps that have a decentralized or centralized program philosophy
- Camps that serve male, female, or coed individuals or groups
- Camps that provide general or specialty outdoor programs
- Camps that serve children and adults with special needs

For questions regarding the applicability of the standards to your camp or program, please call the American Camp Association at 800-428-2267.

Steps to Accreditation

Step 1—Apply by completing the appropriate membership and accreditation application forms.

Step 2—Remit dues and fees as described in current membership materials no later than March 1 for a visit in the summer. Non-summer programs should submit the materials a minimum of three months prior to the requested visit.

Step 3—Complete an Accreditation Process Workshop that explains the process and describes the requirements for accreditation by March 31 for a visit in the summer. For programs occurring outside the summer season, consult ACA staff for training deadlines. At the time of the accreditation visit, an individual must be on the camp site who has completed the Accreditation Process Workshop and has participated in the development of materials for the visit.

Step 4—Submit the Camp Information Form by the designated date (will vary depending on the date the application was submitted, but typically by February 1).

Step 5—Prepare materials and written documentation required by the standards. Review and evaluate each area of camp operation, using the guidelines noted in the standards.

Step 6—Submit the written documentation required in the written documentation for review by the requested date (typically by May 1).
Step 7—Participate in the peer review, a visit by a team of ACA-trained visitors who will spend the day observing the camp and working with the director in the scoring process. This visit must occur when the camp is in full operation so that as many programs as possible can be seen in action during the camp’s primary business season. Results of the visit will be reported to camps no later than October 31 for camps that were visited in that summer.

Note: While a camp may be visited for accreditation during its first season of operation, accreditation is not achieved until action by the local leadership confirms that all accreditation criteria are met. The “accreditation year” is November 1 through October 31.

Because the key purpose of ACA accreditation is education, directors from currently accredited camps consistently reiterate the value of involving additional staff members in the preparation of materials necessary to verify compliance with ACA standards.

About the Visit

The Visitor
Visitors are volunteers, often with a background in camp administration, who have completed at least twenty (20) hours of training prior to conducting visits for ACA. They have also completed an apprenticeship with an experienced visitor. Many visitors are camp directors themselves. They understand the importance of accreditation and the scope of laws, regulations, and procedures of camps.

The Visit
Accreditation visits occur on a typical program day (not the opening or closing day of a camp session) and often require a full day. Visitors typically arrive at camp during or shortly after breakfast and spend the morning touring, observing, and learning about the camp.

During the visit, visitors observe living areas; various program activity areas including aquatic activity areas; healthcare areas; vehicles used for transportation; maintenance and fuel storage areas; food preparation and dining areas; and sleeping accommodations for campers, groups, and staff. Throughout this observation, visitors should have an opportunity to interview staff and campers and observe program activities in action.

Once the camp tour is complete, visitors will meet with the camp director to assess compliance with each standard that applies to the camp. Some of the written documentation required by the standards may have been reviewed during the written documentation review; additional written documentation will be evaluated by visitors during the on-site visit. Visitors will score compliance with the standards as observed at the time of the visit.

The local volunteer leadership schedules and conducts camp visits. They approve accreditation for camps that meet the mandatory standards and the minimum score percentages established by the National Standards Commission. Local volunteer leadership may reject accreditation for camps not meeting at least the minimum criteria.

To achieve accreditation (or reaccreditation), the camp must fully comply with each of the applicable mandatory standards and attain scores of at least 80% in each applicable section of standards.
Notification of the Accreditation Decision

Camps visited in the summer will be notified of the results of the visit no later than October 31 of the same year. Camps visited at other times of the year will be notified between six (6) and eight (8) weeks following the receipt of the score form at the ACA, Inc. offices in Indiana.

Annual Compliance

Every year, including the year of an accreditation visit, the camp must sign the annual Statement of Compliance indicating its continued compliance with applicable laws, regulations, and permit requirements. In every non-visit year, a camp director completes the Annual Accreditation Review, an online set of questions, to show continued compliance with the standards.

Logos

After earning accreditation, the camp may use the ACA accredited camp logo and will receive an accredited camp sign. The use of ACA accreditation signs and logos is a privilege reserved for camps that are currently accredited. All indications of ACA accreditation are protected by U.S. patent and copyright laws.

Review and Appeal

If a camp fails to meet accreditation criteria, it has the right to a review by the local leadership and to question either the overall accreditation decision or the scoring of a particular standard. Should a camp fail a visit, they will be notified by local leadership to discuss the review process.

Differences in Some Requirement Levels

The camp standards represent basic expectations, which apply regardless of the varied types of camp programs and operations. These basic expectations, such as the provision of emergency exits in buildings and lifeguards for swimming, are to be applied to every camp seeking accreditation by ACA. There are instances where ACA standards and state laws or regulations may coincide, and others instances where they do not. Camps should always abide by the more stringent regulations, laws, or standards governing their specific camps.

Other standards vary based on who is delivering the program or services and who has responsibility for supervision of campers. For example, the requirements for the collection and maintenance of health information and for healthcare supervision may be different when the camp is operating a resident camp, versus when a weekend group rents camp facilities to run their own program.

When rental groups are responsible for their own care and supervision, camps must advise rental groups of limitations to the camp’s responsibilities and the extent of the rental group’s responsibilities. Camps are not responsible for collecting health forms, leader qualifications, non-camp-owned vehicle maintenance records, and related information in these circumstances. The need for camps to clarify these responsibilities is consistent with requirements under the law when the site owner operates in a landlord capacity.
Modes of Operation

ACA standards are scored for all operations and programs of the camp, except single-day and one-night/two-day events and program areas not considered to be applicable. For the purposes of the standards, the following four modes are defined:

- **Short-term Camps**: Program is operated and staffed primarily by the camp.
  - Short-term resident camp: Three nights or less. Camp assumes responsibility of the campers 24 hours a day.
  - Short-term day camp: Session is less than 25 hours in a five-day period and campers always go home at the end of the day.
- **Resident Camps**: Sessions vary in length and are four nights or more.
  - Camp assumes responsibility of the campers 24 hours a day.
  - Program is operated and staffed primarily by the camp.
  - Extended trip-and-travel camp programs are typically resident-camp programs, at least three nights in length, and at times, do not have a base location.
  - Extended trip-and-travel program activities are based upon environments encountered as the group moves from location to location. Such programs run as an extension of resident camps (or day camps in some instances) or may be an exclusive trip-and-travel camp, specializing in only trip, travel, or tour programs.
- **Day Camps**: Sessions are more than 25 hours in a five-day period. Campers go home at the end of the day with an occasional overnight. Program is operated and staffed primarily by the camp.
- **Camps Serving Rental**: Involves other camps, groups, or programs that rent or lease the camp's facilities, and perhaps some services, to operate their own camping programs or retreats. The rental group may even be from within the camp's parent organization. Examples of rental groups in this category include most troop and club campouts, youth weekend retreats, outdoor education run by other groups, or specialty programs that operate their session at the camp's facility. The camp may supply some staff and services, such as lifeguards or food service, but the primary responsibility for camper supervision and general programming rests with the rental group. The programs may be short or long sessions. The group utilizing the camp facilities and maintaining responsibility for programming is called the rental group.

To assist camps in determining applicability of standards to their program, the modes are identified in the margin next to each standard under the “Applies to” heading.

**Additional Elements of the Standards**

Standards are easily recognized as the bold text within boxes and are distinguished by an alpha-numerical ordering system. For example, Standard AD.5 indicates the fifth standard in the Administration Standards section.

Standards may be composed of multiple components, which are typically indicated by a lettered list. All components must be satisfied and are scored as an aggregate. For example, Standard AD.5 has three components, and all of the components must be met for the standard to be in compliance (Figure 1).
In some instances, there may be more than one scoreable item under the same standard’s primary number and heading; each additional scoreable item is identified with an additional number subordinate to the primary standard number. For example, under FA.1, Emergency Exits, there are two separate scoreable standards—labeled FA.1.1 and FA.1.2 (Figure 2). Each part of the standard, although under the same heading, is scored independently.

Figure 1

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**FA.1 EMERGENCY EXITS**

Are all buildings used for sleeping constructed or equipped with the following safety features:

FA.1.1 At least one easily accessible emergency exit in addition to the main door or entrance and not immediately adjacent/next to the main door or entrance? **YES NO**

FA.1.2 A direct means of emergency exit to the outside from each sleeping floor not location on ground level? **YES NO**

This standard may be met by providing a written statement from the local fire inspection authority stating the building is in full compliance with all local fire codes. If the area in which the camp is located has no fire code, the standard must be met as written.

**Contextual Education**

“Buildings” for the purposes of this standard are permanent, enclosed structures that remain intact regardless of season. Tents and Adirondack shelters are not considered buildings for the purposes of this standard. This standard includes buildings used by campers, staff, or rental groups. Day camps with overnights in buildings will also score this standard.

In FA.1.1, emergency exits should be located as far away and opposite the main entrances as possible so they could be used if the main entrance is blocked. State or local fire officials or insurance underwriters may provide guidance as to what constitutes an acceptable escape plan.

The emergency-exit needs of persons with disabilities should be considered. Ground-level entrances should be accessible without the use of lifts or elevators to facilitate easy access and quick evacuation. In split-level buildings with ground-level access on only one side, emergency exits from upper-level sleeping quarters must facilitate quick, safe evacuation for everyone in case the ground-level exit is blocked.

In FA.1.2, “to the outside” means that either the escape is on the outside of the building or an enclosed stairway exits directly to the outside at ground level.

**Compliance Demonstration**

Visitor observations:
- Randomly selected sleeping areas, particularly those with sleeping areas not on ground level

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**Applies to**

To assist camps in determining applicability to their program, the modes of operation to which each standard applies are identified in the margin under the “Applies to” heading.
Mandatory Standards

Some standards are designated as mandatory. The word “MANDATORY” appears in the margin next to these standards. If the word “All” is listed with the mandatory designation, all the parts listed below the standard’s primary heading are mandatory. For example, both Standards FA.1.1 and FA.1.2 (in the previous example) are mandatory standards under FA.1.

Alternatively, there may be only certain parts that are mandatory. In this case, the “MANDATORY” designation in the margin specifies the part of the standard that is mandatory. ST.7 is an example, where only Standard ST.7.2 is mandatory (Figure 3). Compliance with the mandatory parts of a standard is required for accreditation to be granted, regardless of scores achieved in other areas of the standard.

A complete list of mandatory standards can be found on the ACA website.
Written Documentation Required

“Written documentation required” will appear in the margin next to the standard if written documentation is required for the compliance demonstration.

Included in Written Documentation Review

“Included in Required Written Documentation Review” will appear in the margin next to the standard if written documentation for this standard is required to be submitted and viewed PRIOR to the beginning of the camp season and the on-site visit.

A complete list of standards included in the required written documentation review is located on the ACA website.

Does Not Apply

Some standards may not apply to certain types of camps or may not be applicable to a particular camp because a specific program is not offered. For example, some camps may not use public providers, never have overnight trips, or never lease facilities. The “Does not apply” designation (DNA) appears in the margin beside the standard (Figure 1, 2, and 3).

Contextual Education and Compliance Demonstration

Below each standard, two additional sections appear. The first is “Contextual Education,” which provides camp administrators and visitors assistance in understanding the terminology of the standard, education regarding the standard and its intent, and assistance in the consistent application of a standard in a variety of situations. The contextual education section may help in determining applicability and defining terms.

The second is “Compliance Demonstration,” which identifies for directors and visitors the minimum expectation of the ACA National Standards Commission as to how compliance with the standard should be determined. The compliance demonstration might include the following:

- **Written documentation:** Written procedures/documents must be seen by the visitor when specified by the standard or a margin note. Written procedures/documents shall be evaluated by the visitor to see that they contain the specifics required by the standard.
- **Visitor interviews:** Procedures or policies not specified in the standard or in the margin note to be in writing may be described by the camp administration, staff, or campers.
- **Visitor observation:** The visitors’ tour around the property will give them an informal opportunity to observe facilities, interactions, and the implementation of policies and procedures in camp programs. Standards required to be “in practice” or “rehearsed” are to be verified by the visitor through discussion or observation to ascertain that implementation has occurred.

Programs, activities, and modes of operation not observed on the day of the visit are to be scored by visitors based on written documentation and discussion of the standard’s requirements with appropriate camp staff.
Resources

Additional resources to assist the camp administrator in the preparation for their accreditation visit can be found on the ACA website: www.ACAcamps.org. Look under “Accreditation” for “Resources.” Downloadable documents include:

- Standards at a Glance
- List of Standards indicating mandatory status, if written documentation is required, etc.
- List of Mandatory Standards
- List of standards in the required Written Documentation Review
- Skill verification charts
- Examples of various policies and procedures