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The Redwoods Group Insurance Program for YMCAs

## RISK MANAGEMENT

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### TOPIC: Staff: Supervisors or Participants

A frequent discussion between risk management and program staff involves staff participation vs. supervision. Our data reveals that the majority of serious, expensive injuries to program staff arise from their playing games with the children. Program staff often says that kids will not have fun if staff doesn't play. This document will discuss the appropriate type and extent of involvement that staff should have in children's activities.

There are three arenas in which program staff often receive participation-related injuries: school-aged childcare, especially in day and resident YMCAs; youth sports; and fitness programs. Most of the incidents arise from the first, but life-changing injuries have occurred in the others as well.

Let's address the childcare and YMCA programs first. Our Ys are built around core values that we want to demonstrate to and develop in the children we serve. The staff's task, from counselor to senior director, is to lead, teach, guide, and direct; to listen, monitor, correct, and encourage. If staff becomes overly involved in the activity instead of guiding and supervising the kids, they have lost sight of their mission and will not accomplish it. They may impress the kids or others by their athletic prowess, win a meaningless game, and have lots of fun, but they will not effectively shape young lives.

So, where's the balance? Staff must actively supervise all activities. That certainly will involve demonstrating how to play and often may include playing, but only in a position and to the extent that monitoring and guiding are first accomplished. It will not involve competing or being the center of attention. Staff participation should be focused on the kids' lives, not on the games they play. Staff should listen closely, observe carefully, and interact thoughtfully with all of the kids using words, actions, and when appropriate, physical contact

Should staff play with the children? Absolutely! But expressing and fostering YMCA core values should be the primary goal. A secondary goal is that the kids have fun so that they will stay with the program and benefit from it. Staff also should have fun, but that ought to be a tertiary goal.

Playground duty is often a part of preschool or school-aged childcare. The task is to monitor, not to play with the kids – it certainly doesn't include chatting with other staff or daydreaming. Most staff injuries arising from playground duty come from inattention to the activity around them or from playing with the kids.

Youth sports programs are another area where staff injuries occur. They happen while coaching individual children, when giving demonstrations, while spotting difficult moves, and sometimes when being inattentive. The purpose of spotting is to protect the child from harm but that often places the staff person at risk. Teach how to catch and where to be positioned – and continually stress attentiveness.

Demonstrate at reduced speed – the goal is to teach, not impress; slower speeds make learning easier and injury to staff less likely.

Staff must stay alert and aware of all that is happening around them, not just of their immediate focus. Arms and legs move; bodies tumble and fall; balls get thrown, hit, or kicked; hockey sticks and bats get

swung and may slip and fly. The inattentive can easily be injured.

Fitness class instructors set the image and pace for those they teach. Because they must often talk through much or all of the session they should be in much better physical condition than the level of class they lead. Any weights they use should be minimal – they are present to lead and teach others, not push their own limits. Proper warm up is important all involved – instructor and class.

Orientations by fitness room staff should usually guide each individual through actual use of the equipment or exercise. If a demonstration is necessary the weight or resistance settings should be set to a minimum and the pace should be reduced.

Staff's primary tasks are to guide, direct, and monitor. Engaged participation should neither compromise staff's foremost assignment nor stretch the limits of their physical fitness. Consider – who is left to supervise the children if staff is injured?

**Please call us at 800-463-8546 to discuss this or any other risk management safety tip, or visit our web site at [www.redwoodsgroup.com](http://www.redwoodsgroup.com) to learn more about YMCA risk management issues.**