

Service, Support and Success:
The Direct Support Worker Newsletter
Volume 1: Issue 9

Beaches, Bodies and Barbeques
Cautions and Tips for Direct-Care Staff
Supporting People with Disabilities in the Summer

Nicole Twigger-Cotton and Dave Hingsburger
Vita Community Living Services

When strolling down memory lane, summer is often remembered as idyllic. The summers of our youth were filled with long, hot days and leisurely hours spent in pleasurable activities. In fact though, summers were fun because cautions were taken. Sunburn and bug bites are as much a part of summer as someone screaming hysterically, ‘Don’t eat the potato salad, it’s been left out in the sun!’ Summer for direct-care staff can be full of conflicts – going to the beach to work runs in direct contrast to the urge to go to the beach for fun. Providing support is a job which, when done well, is as invisible as it is functional. Everyone needs a holiday and the job of the direct-care worker is to make summer holidays fun – but also to make it safe.

The following tips are provided just as a reminder of the kinds of things that direct-care staff need to be aware of in order for summer to be a season of rest and relaxation, of fun and frolic, of sun AND safety.

Caution:

The tips included in this article are only general hints and are not to be seen as anything more than ‘common sense’ rules. Individuals in support may require different and very specific supports. This article does not address anything more than everyday issues.

Bodies and Boundaries

Let’s get the most difficult one to talk about out of the way first. Summer ‘hot’ spots, like the beach, the park and the swimming pool, are places where people of all ages gather for fun. It’s important that direct-care staff be alert to the kinds of social dangers that come with these places. Notice if someone with a disability is watching children at play, they may, out of enjoyment

want to wander over and join in with the children. This can be a purely innocent move that can be seen as suspicious and dangerous behaviour. Remember that distraction is a wonderful tool and if distraction doesn't work – moving will. It may seem like a drastic suggestion, but an adult watching (or staring at) children playing can result in needless problems. Worse would be not noticing and finding an outraged parent demanding why an adult is playing with her children.

Cautions and Tips:

- 1) Think about where you are going. If you are going with adults, stay away from places designed specifically for children – petting zoos, children's amusement parks, wading pools.
- 2) Bring along activities that can be enjoyed – books, games, crafts.
- 3) If you are supporting someone who has previously had problems with children, make sure you are familiar with their safety protocols.

Summertime can be distracting for everyone, it's a time where people may be wearing very few or very revealing clothing. An 'itsy, bitsy, teeny, weeny, yellow polka dot bikini' is perfectly appropriate for the beach. But women wear these expecting that they will not be subject to staring, pointing or crass sexual remarks. The same is true for men who may be sporting only shorts while displaying six pack abs – or a keg – who expect to both be noticed and ignored at the same time. It's important to be alert to staring and ensure that everyone around feels safe.

Cautions and Tips:

- 1) Provide non-intrusive supervision; pay attention to what's going on around you.
- 2) If someone is staring – distract, redirect or engage.
- 3) If someone has a habit of watching others, without malice or without sexual interest, invest in sunglasses so the behaviour is not obvious.
- 4) Signs of sexual arousal mean that action has to be taken, if distraction doesn't work, it's important to leave the environment.

Summer's relaxed boundaries are wonderful, but they can lead to very serious mistakes and misbehaviour for those who may not have the best boundaries. It's important for people to be supported and for staff to not give in to the temptation to lay back and sunbathe. Opening one's eyes to find someone masturbating while staring at a fellow sunbather or into the face of an angry police officer is a shock you want to avoid!

Barbeques, Picnics and That Damn Potato Salad

Your first complaint, when reading the tips that follow, is probably going to be ‘this is so institutional’ ... um, no. The recommendations which follow are good for everyone. Most people let things slide a bit over the holidays and, when they do, they can end up sick, even very sick, as a result. Taking time and care only makes sense. The idea of having a meat thermometer at a BBQ isn’t ‘institutional’ it’s ‘inspired’. Summer is a horrible time to end up sitting in the emergency room of a hospital. Part of the hope in these suggestions is that the summer become safer for people with disabilities – AND – for the staff and their families too. There is a reason they call perishables, PERISHable – they can kill.

Cautions and Tips:

- 1) Use the meat thermometer! Meat should be cooked to at least 160 degrees. Don’t go by colour of meat, go by heat!
- 2) Keep perishables cool. A good rule is not to eat anything that has been left out for an hour.
- 3) Bring foods that are easy to carry and that carry energy – citrus fruits and carrot sticks are good.
- 4) If you are going to be out more than a couple of hours, take a snack!

Food is one thing, water is another. Keeping hydrated is important during the summer. It’s easy to forget, with the fun and the frolic, to drink enough water and to keep everyone hydrated. There is an irony of going to the lake and not getting enough water! Some of the signs of mild dehydration can be seen: skin flushing, fatigue, weakness, chills and loss of appetite. If mild dehydration continues, there can be muscle cramps, headaches, nausea, increased respiration and extreme fatigue. The solution to dehydration, surprisingly enough, is hydration!

Cautions and Tips:

- 1) Drink water!
- 2) If the person doesn’t like water, bring along other liquids, water-rich fruits like watermelon or even popsicles!
- 3) Freeze some juice boxes to use in the cooler to keep food cool, when they melt, they are an ice cold treat.
- 4) If you are engaging in activities like throwing Frisbees or playing baseball, bring along a sports drink, they have electrolytes that are lost with perspiration.

Sun, Shade and Bugs

Sitting down in a wheelchair that's been left in the sun on a hot day is no picnic! Toasted buns are for burgers only! Sometimes people forget the obvious – metal gets hot. Skin can burn from touching hot metal and it can burn from too much exposure. These burns can be quite serious and quite painful. We are all careful around a hot burner – but sometimes we forget that the sun is the biggest burner of all. As much as we might enjoy a sunny day, sun can be the most dangerous of all summer companions.

Cautions and Tips:

- 1) Cover wheelchairs with a towel or set them in the shade when not in use. Even with these precautions, check the heat of the metal or the seat before helping someone into one.
- 2) Consider getting a cooling cushion for the wheel chair, these absorb heat and help keep the passenger cool.
- 3) Never, ever, ever, leave someone in a van or car on a hot day while you run into a store. It may take work to get them out to go with you ... but, you are at work.
- 4) Encourage everyone to wear loose-fitting clothing made from light material.
- 5) Wear UV blocking sunglasses.
- 6) Remember to bring summer hats with wide brims.
- 7) Use a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15 (more if the person is fair skinned) and follow the instructions on its use.
- 8) Use the insect repellent after applying sunscreen.

You've probably noticed something really big missing here. Well, you are right. It's so big that it needs to be talked about separately. Many medications make people prone to sunburns. You'd think that a side effect that is unavoidable would be highlighted and marked on the bottle itself. In many cases it is, but in many cases it is not. It's important to review the medications with a pharmacist or the individual's doctor. Are there things you need to know regarding the medications and summer activities – ask specific questions so that you don't end up inadvertently causing harm.

Cautions and Tips:

- 1) Double check the 'summer and sun' side effects of medications with a pharmacist or a doctor.

It's Supposed to be FUN!!

With all of what you've read so far, you're probably already looking forward to fall. The intention of this article isn't to be a 'downer,' but to provide tips that will make summer fun and free from mishaps. The goal here is that the kinds of things that can be avoided, through planning and forethought, are indeed avoided. Simple as that. There are a few other things, though, that don't fit into the neat categories above, things about *how* we do summer with the people we support.

Cautions and Tips:

- 1) It's their holiday – talk to them! Make sure that the individual is involved in planning activities and vacation destinations.
- 2) Be careful not to overschedule time – remember the song, 'summertime and the living is easy.' Downtime can be the best time.
- 3) Don't guess – ask. Because someone likes swimming at a pool doesn't mean they are going to like a vacation by the lake.
- 4) Don't exclude – include. Because someone may have significant problem behaviours doesn't mean they can't enjoy some summer activities. Plan, strategize and give it a go.
- 5) This is their vacation, not yours. It doesn't matter if you love the beach or hate the beach – what matters is how the person you support feels about the beach.

Summary

Well, that's it. We probably missed things that should have been included, but hopefully this will get you started. It's important to remember that a 'general article' can never cover what's needed for a 'specific individual.' So make sure that you know the unique needs and the specific desires of the people you support. The best thing about human services is getting to know the people we serve – so, use what you know and add in some of the ideas offered here ... and have a great summer.

Support, Service and Success: The Direct Support Newsletter invites submissions for consideration. For information about criteria for articles or to discuss your idea, please contact the newsletter editors:

Dave Hingsburger at dhingsburger@vitacls.org

Or

Angie Nethercott at anethercott@handstfhn.ca