

Understanding Bullying Within the Camp Setting: Tips for Parents

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.

In order to be considered bullying, the behavior must be aggressive and include:

- **An Imbalance of Power:** Kids who bully use their power—such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity—to control or harm others. Power imbalances can change over time and in different situations, even if they involve the same people.
- **Repetition:** Bullying behaviors happen more than once or have the potential to happen more than once.

Bullying in the Camp Setting

Camp is similar to school and other settings in which children and youth gather—in that bullying does occur. Children engaging in new activities, meeting new friends, establishing varying social groups at camp, and sharing living quarters with other campers present challenges to even the most well-adjusted

child. The good news is that camps are well-prepared to address bullying and help children who bully deal with counterproductive behavior, too. Proven supervisory practices, activities geared to the developmental level of individual children, and the promotion of a spirit of inclusivity and caring help children to exert higher degrees of cooperation and self-control.

What are the harmful effects of bullying?

Bullying is not a normal part of growing up. Simply put, bullying hurts and children can experience both short- and long-term emotional consequences when they are victims of bullying. Camp staff members are trained to recognize both the overt and subtle signs that a child may have experienced bullying. Parents also may be the first to notice these shifts in behavior.

Warning Signs

Look for changes in the child. However, be aware that not all children who are bullied exhibit warning signs. Some signs that may point to a bullying problem are:

- Unexplainable injuries
- Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewelry

- Frequent headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick or faking illness
- Changes in eating habits, like suddenly skipping meals or binge eating. Kids may come home from school hungry because they did not eat lunch.
- Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares
- Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go to school
- Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations
- Feelings of helplessness or decreased self esteem
- Self-destructive behaviors such as running away from home, harming themselves, or talking about suicide
- Will parents be informed if a bullying incident occurs?
- How are staff members trained to recognize and intervene in bullying situations?
- What proactive efforts do staff members employ to prevent bullying from occurring?
- Does the camp have specific rules about bullying?
- How are campers instructed to recognize and deal with bullying?
- How are campers supervised between activities?
- Will the camp provide names of other parents prior to camp to ask about their child's experiences with bullying at camp and the responsiveness of staff?
- Is your child's camp accredited by the American Camp Association? If so, parents are assured that the camp has committed time, resources, and training to meet or exceed over 300 research-based standards ranging from health and wellness to physical safety.

How can parents find out about camp policies on bullying?

Informed parents are best prepared to select a camp that meets their standards for staff, programs, and safety.

Ask challenging questions of the camp director, such as

- What is his or her understanding of bullying?
- What procedures are in place to address bullying situations?

How can I help my child deal with bullying?

Before Camp Begins

- Discuss bullying with your child—what it is, why it is unacceptable, and what your child's response to bullying should be.

- Tell your child that you expect him or her to help a child who is being bullied or excluded.
- Encourage your child to talk to camp staff if he or she sees or experiences bullying. Children need support from responsible adults to address bullying.
- Establish clear expectations about respecting others and gaining respect.
- Follow through with a consistent set of rules and consequences.
- Spend time with your child in enjoyable activities.
- Praise your child for the attempts he or she has likely made to resolve the situation.
- Talk with the camp director about consequences for the child being bullied and about increased support from other campers and staff for your child.
- Help your child understand that real friends are not mean to each other.

Once Camp Begins

- Listen and communicate regularly once your child is at camp. Ask your child about friendships that he or she has made and about concerns that your child has about interactions with other campers.
- Reinforce positive behavior with specific praise such as, “Your counselor told me you controlled your temper when another child pushed you. That really helped the other campers not to get into a fight.”

What can I do if my child is bullied?

- Support your child. Bullying is not the fault of the child being bullied.
- Gather information about the incident. Ask who, what, when, where, and how?

What if my child bullies?

- Try to get a full understanding of what happened.
- Ask yourself whether there have been any recent changes or negative events in your child’s life.
- Discuss consequences of bullying with the camp director regarding specific episodes and the response from camp staff.
- Reinforce your rule that bullying must stop.
- Help your child understand how bullying affects others.
- Cooperate with the camp director and staff to reinforce positive behaviors in your child.