

## Raising Awareness to Reduce Bullying in Summer Camps Bullying Prevention at Camp — One in a Series of Three Articles

By Joel D. Haber, Ph.D.

Think back to your elementary/grade school years, and ask yourself if you can recall the top three favorite memories of your childhood. They probably involve something loving, connecting, or good to eat. Now, do the same for the least favorite memories, and for many of us, there's a painful memory of bullying that we may recall. Many of us can't remember what we had for lunch last week, but can remember in exquisite detail the memory of a bully — and the hurt and suffering we experienced. In the past, bullying was assumed to be a rite of passage and something that "you just had to go through" as part of growing up. Although the bullying may have happened on the way to and from school or during recess, no one really talked about it — let alone did anything about it. Those of us involved with summer camp thought that camp was an escape and refuge from the school bully.

When a camp director called to talk about some bullying incidents he experienced during the summer with some kids he thought he knew well, it generated awareness that these issues may, in fact, exist in the summer camp setting, too. Following two summers of training at twenty camps with three thousand camp staff, it became clear that bully problems can occur in all summer camps. They can be overt and obvious — or insidious and "below your radar."

The most important thing to realize is that the first step toward making your camp a bully-free environment is "awareness." No more living in denial of the problem, but rather committed to keeping an open mind and a clear perspective of your environment — a comprehensive view that gives you proper influence and management of what is happening in camp.

This is a different era in our society and recognizing the existence of bullying behavior isn't the end of the world — or an admittance that there is something wrong with your camp or you as a director. Becoming aware allows you to become knowledgeable of what goes on both overtly and subtly. How can you be proactive, effective, and decisive (the focus of the next two articles in this series) unless you know what is happening. Knowledge about bullying gives you the power to deal with it quickly and successfully.

### Bullying Behavior

Wherever children gather to study and/or play, the potential for hurtful behavior by children against one another is possible. Studies in schools reveal that approximately 11 percent of children are bullied repeatedly and that 13 percent frequently bully others (Nansel, Overpeck, et al. 2001). Repeated hurtful behavior against a child can result in damage to their physical and emotional development. This damage is not limited to the victim though: the bully as well as the onlookers who do not intervene may also suffer both short and long-term consequences (Olweus 2003; Ross 1996).

The American Camp Association (ACA) has identified the need to protect the emotional and physical safety of our children as a critical mission for good reason. My own research of summer camps reveals that bullying behavior can exist in all summer camps — and based on surveys of twenty summer camp directors, it is one of the top three reasons children don't return to camp the following year. Of equal concern is the amount of bullying that may go undetected and unreported. Sixty percent of bullying may not be reported, because kids don't feel that adults can solve these problems (Unpublished data, presented at ACA National meeting, Orlando, 2005). That is why awareness is so crucial. If you deny that bullying exists at your camp, you are letting staff know that they may be helpless to deal with it, too.

We would all like to prevent the helplessness and distress that parents experience when they receive a letter like this from their child who is away at camp:

Mom and Dad,

I hate it here. No one likes me. The kids in my bunk tease me and laugh at me. I try to join in and no one wants me to sit with them. My counselors laugh with the other kids and are mean to me, too. I can't stand it anymore. I feel so alone.

This article will provide a framework for understanding bullying in summer camp and a language that can be used with campers and staff about the various types of bullying behavior seen in camp and those behaviors that may be less obvious. The first step in "awareness" is understanding.

## Bullying 101: What Is It?

Bullying is any intentional, hurtful act, committed by one or more campers against another. It can also be committed by counselors against other counselors or campers. In fact it can happen when anyone in power or seeking power intentionally hurts another person. It is not fighting (between equals) or rough play. Fighting between equals is really an escalation of conflict. Rough play is normal between kids, but has a safety net built in. If one kid says stop — it's over.

Bullying happens because there is an imbalance of real or perceived power between a bully and a victim that is exploited. The primary goal of the bully is to increase his/her power. The secondary goal of the bully is to increase his/her social capital by getting support from those around who observe bullying and do not help the victim. As observers allow bullying behavior to happen, the bully grows in status. Generally, the bully's wish for power is greater than the empathy he or she has for others, which makes bullying easier for him or her than it would be for most other children. When bullying occurs, the bully thrives on the power of not responding to the victims hurt and upset. It may intensify as long as no one stops it.

## Types of Bullying Behavior Seen in Camp

Bullying behavior is divided into three types: Physical, Relational, and Verbal. These behaviors are further divided into mild, moderate, and severe, which can help define the extent of the problem and determine if a certain type of bullying behavior is escalating. Bullying behavior usually has an escalating pattern — it generally starts out mildly to give the bullying child a chance to observe a victim's reaction. This can escalate in severity if the victim does not send a signal to the bully that this behavior is unacceptable. For example, bullying that begins as a physical type can escalate in severity with more physical bullying or move into other forms, like exclusion and verbal harassment.

### Physical

Physical bullying is the type of bullying most easily observed and most commonly thought of when we talk about bullying. This includes punching, hitting, shoving, hair pulling, excessive tickling, cutting in line, rat-tailing, defacing personal property, or stealing one's belongings. It's observed in the camp environment in many forms — a child's stuffed animal is stolen or destroyed, a child is knocked down in front of others, a chair is pulled out from a child before he or she sits down, a child is physically bruised over and over again. It also includes crossing over into one's personal space when a child is told not to. This can make a camper very uncomfortable and intimidated.

### Verbal

Verbal bullying involves hurtful name-calling, mocking, teasing, gossiping, intimidation, or threatening to embarrass a child. Verbal bullying is harder to observe unless you are within earshot of it. The hurtful unwarranted nickname, comments about clothes, or being told that you are unpopular can all be meant to undermine a child's self-worth. Verbal bullying has to be included as bullying behavior because of its insidious nature. How vulnerable is a child when a painful comment like "nobody in this bunk likes you" is expressed to an unsuspecting camper?

### Relational

Relational bullying has at its meaning an intension to exclude through leaving others out, humiliation, threats to reveal

personal information, blackmailing, manipulating friendships, and the use of peer pressure to hurt another or push someone against their will. I've seen girls and boys preventing others from joining them at a table, creating a pact to not pass a ball to a child who wants to play a game, leaving one child behind on purpose when they leave a bunk, and kids in a bunk who refuse to let a camper join in on a night activity like playing cards or another game.

In summer camp, exclusion is often the most painful kind of bullying. When campers experience exclusion, their summer is compromised because their social network is damaged. Verbal bullying may be more painful than physical bullying because words don't heal as quickly as a punch or shove. Hurtful words and name calling can undermine a child's self-esteem. Verbal bullying can linger psychologically with a victim and undermine his or her sense of self for a long time; whereas, physical bullying may be the least painful for children because many times there is a beginning and an end.

## Cyberbullying

Internet bullying is the fastest rising type of bullying and can occur between the summer camp seasons, and many camp directors and family members are concerned about managing this growing problem. Cyberbullying can involve mean e-mails or phone text messages sent by cell phones, unwanted pictures sent through camera phones, or the posting of information on blogs that are intended to embarrass and humiliate. Cyberbullying takes the form of exclusion (e-mails between campers: let's not have Jane in our bunk this summer) to outright hurtful words given directly to campers over the Internet (No one wants you back this summer because no one likes you.) Unflattering pictures of campers can be posted on the Internet after the season, and cruel messages about campers and staff are posted with the intention of embarrassing and humiliating the victim.

Internet use is so pervasive with our children today that it is replacing the telephone as the number one means of communication a generation ago. The potential problem with the Internet — and bullying specifically — is that it is indirect — you can talk about anyone without seeing their reaction; you can think and feel a mean thought, write it out on e-mail, and press the send key on your computer. There are no immediate reactions from the other person to dissuade you from sending the message. And, unfortunately, you can't get your e-mail back when and if you calm down. The damage is likely to be done because your words become a written record that is in the hands of someone else.

Unless a parent or camp leader is looking for this type of bullying and/or asking campers about it, there is no way to know how many kids are potentially affected by this. We don't yet know how many kids in the off-season may not return to camp as a result of this type of bullying, but there is certainly reason to believe that this is the cause of some nonreturns. My own data reveals that approximately 13 percent of children surveyed experience Internet bullying, which matches the frequency of school bullying discussed earlier. No camp is immune to these issues, and cyberbullying is becoming a growing problem because children feel less personal responsibility to others through this means of indirect communication.

## Types of Bullying We Don't See

In addition to cyberbullying, other types of bullying issues may be occurring in the camp setting.

There is evidence of a high prevalence of counselors who bully campers and/or each other (see May/June 2005 *Camping Magazine*, "A Positive Camp Culture Is Key to Preventing Staff Bullying," page 58). A counselor who bullies is a particularly difficult problem, because children are dependant on the staff person for safety. This type of counselor behavior may set a model that allows campers to test out their own bullying behavior — and creates an escalation of bullying in their campers because it is seen as an acceptable form of behavior. It is also a problem if a child is dependant on his or her counselor and feels afraid to report aggressive behavior to the counselor's superior.

I have also witnessed a camper or group of campers bully counselors. When children feel a greater level of power over an adult, it creates a significant problem in the bunk. Staff may be reluctant to report this for fear of their own job loss and embarrassment in front of their peers — as well as feeling a decrease in personal status among their peers.

## The Bullies and the Victims

### The Bullies

Remember the image of bullying you may have experienced earlier in life. Who was that bullying kid? Today's bullies are not necessarily the big school yard brutes who have low self-esteem and are looking to improve their feelings of inadequacy by bullying. In reality, there is no evidence that this is so. A camp bully may be popular, seek social status, be smart, well-connected, and even well liked (Olweus 2003). Some may look like "mean girls" and some may not (Wiseman 2002). They are more comfortable with aggression and use this to earn social rewards by making others uncomfortable and hurting them. Usually these skills outweigh any empathic side. They are masters at denial — and blame. The problem is that many of these kids look and feel like "leaders." Leaders may be hard to differentiate from a bully because they may have the same qualities — except they lack empathy and a willingness to look at their own personal responsibility for their behavior. One way to remember this when looking at your campers or staff — leaders are inclusive and bullies tend to be exclusive.

### The Victims

Victims on the other hand, are kids who are "vulnerable" in some way and feel less socially connected (Olweus 1993). A camper who is alone, less socially assertive, passive, meek, or quiet may be an easy target. Bullies test out their power until they find a target that won't fight back — or won't get the social support they need from others around them. When bullies see they can brutalize someone, they seek the support of others to blame the victim for their "deserved" attack. There are always reasons that bullies find to hurt others, even though no one deserves to get bullied.

### The "Observers"

Remember the statistics cited earlier about the number of kids involved as bullies and victims. In any bullying situation, there are approximately 80 percent of kids or more who may observe bullying but may do nothing to stop it. When victims see that observers do not step in and help them, or counselors do not intercede, the victims feel worse. The victimization they experience feels justified if no one steps up to stop it. There is an added effect on the observers over time, too. If no one steps in to help a victim, the observers try to justify their own unhelpful behavior. They themselves begin to "blame" the victim for the bullying they receive. This cycle makes the victim feel even more bullied (Coloroso 2003).

## Characteristics

### Boys vs. Girls

Boys are generally seen as more physically strong, so we believe that boys use physical forms of aggression more than any other type. Nothing could be farther from the truth. From my own research, boys tease and use relational forms of aggression in summer camp more than they do physical forms of aggression. Although "rough and tumble" play is common in boys, they have become sophisticated in their ways to hurt verbally and exclude other kids. These forms of aggression can leave scars for boys who emotionally do not know how to handle these feelings.

Additionally, my research has shown that girls, on the other hand, are much more comfortable with "indirect" forms of communication and use verbal teasing and exclusion more than double their use of physical forms of aggression. Gossiping and exclusion are the two most common forms of bullying for girls — and it has almost become a "universal language" for them. The problem in camps occurs when counselors model this behavior, so campers feel justified in their behavior. (These issues will be addressed more fully in upcoming articles.)

### Younger vs. Older

Developmentally, bullying behavior is expressed in children as early as they begin to interact with each other. The adult response to this behavior, as well as how children learn to manage these interactions, is critical to their future development. Kids have a lot of practice in these techniques by the time they become campers. The real problem with bullying manifests itself by ages nine/ten — when kids recognize their own power over others. Children who have tested out bullying behavior and succeeded at it will develop more entrenched bullying by ages nine/ten. From my experience, it is much harder to create empathetic children when they see their bullying behavior brings them the power status they seek.

Bullying generally moves from physical forms to verbal and relational forms as children hit teenage years. As physical forms of bullying decrease by high school, the verbal and relational forms can still maintain themselves. This is why we must work to create camp environments in which this behavior is not allowed. Camp has to be a place that is different for children and allows them to thrive socially without the emotional and/or physical safety fears of bullying.

### School Bullying vs. Camp Bullying

School bullying occurs in the cafeteria, at recess, in the hallway, or in bathrooms — anywhere that supervision is lean. Bullying in the classroom happens less frequently because the classroom is a structured place and the power (teacher) is close by. School environments generally have much less supervision for their children outside the classroom with staff that may not be trained in bully-prevention methods.

The camp environment is generally more relaxed than a school environment. Bullying occurs during free time, in the shower when kids are vulnerable, or at night when counselors may be outside the bunk. The more subtle forms of bullying, like teasing and exclusion, can happen when groups of kids are away from their counselors or have less supervision. It can also happen around a counselor — if that staff person sees nothing wrong with this behavior and is complicit in it. One of the best markers for finding vulnerable and potentially victimized children is to watch your bunks and observe those campers who don't have someone to walk with, or find the camper who is always late to leave the bunk and doesn't feel part of the bunk community. The children who do not fit in become isolated and potentially targeted — and they may try to hide this from others.

### The Key

The key to all of this is that kids come to camp to broaden their social network, improve their skills, and feel good about themselves. For up to two months in a summer, children need a place to feel safe with supervision that is willing to step in and provide opportunities for them to thrive.

Camp has to be a place where physical and emotional safety is paramount — to ensure that children have the opportunities to grow. Without this, camps do not separate themselves from other institutions. You can make a difference by being very proactive about bullying reduction and prevention. Begin with awareness, and you've taken the first step toward action!

Photo on page 58 courtesy of Camp Wohelo, South Casco, Maine.

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