

# Powerfully Promoting Positive Youth Relations at Summer Camp

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This Document provides an introduction to Powerfully Promoting Positive Youth Relations in Youth Organizations and Be a FRIEND! Professional Development and Youth Education resources are available.

There are significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of bullying prevention efforts in schools in the U.S., especially at the secondary level. Because most summer camps implement approaches that are similar to those implemented in schools, it is important to reassess the effectiveness of these approaches and to redirect bullying prevention efforts in a direction that, based on new research insight, may achieve greater effectiveness.

The overall objective of the approach outlined in this article is empowering young people with the insight and skills necessary to present themselves with self-confidence and more effectively respond to such hurtful situations, to stop themselves from being hurtful and make things right, and to safety and effectively step in to help if they witness these kinds of hurtful situations. The objective also is to improve the manner in which adults respond to hurtful situations to support such resilience, restoration.

Youth organizations will find the insight provided will support them in better ensuring a positive climate in the context of their organization activities.

Many youth organizations also seek to prepare their young members to assume leadership roles in their organization, schools, as well as in the community. These young people will often be in positions to witness situations involving bullying or other hurtful or disrespectful behavior. Youth organizations that provide the insight for their

members to engage in positive peer intervention can have a wider positive effect.

The recommendations are grounded in extensive research into the underlying factors contributing to the concerns and positive approaches that hold the promise of more effectively addressing these concerns.

## **Focusing on All Players**

First, it is necessary to better understand the different roles young people play in being targeted, engaging in hurtful behavior, and responding when they witness such hurtful behavior. The six general roles young people play fall into three categories. It is also helpful to recognize where these young people fall on the “social ladder” and their degree of personal power.

### *Those Who Are Targeted or Left Out*

Lower social status youth who are more frequently bullied or left out, and who have low levels of personal power. This includes young people who are perceived to be “different” in some way, including those who are obese, have disabilities, have a minority sexual orientation or identity, and those who have a different race, religion, or national origin.<sup>1</sup>

Those who are more frequently targeted lack self-confidence. They also often lack three important social skills: reading nonverbal cues, understanding their social meaning, and coming up with options for resolving a social conflict.<sup>2</sup> In a residential camp situation, this group of young

people likely also includes those who experience homesickness.

The objective with these young people is to help them gain greater self confidence and resilience, learn effective ways to respond if someone is hurtful or they are feeling distressed, establish supportive connections with adults, and form friendships with other young people who share their interests.

### *Those Who Are Hurtful*

As noted, there are two underlying motivations for those who engage in hurtful behavior.<sup>3</sup>

Those young people who are Marginalized are lower social status youth who are both bullied or left out and engage in aggressive behavior. These young people likely have also been bullied or abused and are fighting back against a community that has cast them out. They are often impulsive, have anger issues, and engage in other risky or violent behavior. These young people are very low on the Social Ladder, but they appear to have greater personal power which leads them to fight back.

The objective with these young people is the same as those who are targeted, with the additional objective of holding them accountable to stop and remedy the harm if they are hurtful.

Higher social status Socially Motivated hurtful young people disparage others as a way to achieve social dominance. These “social climbers” are well-integrated. They are strategic and intentional when being hurtful. Socially Motivated hurtful young people appear to have higher levels of cognitive empathy.<sup>4</sup> They are very adept at figuring out exactly how the one they have targeted feels, as well as the reaction of the witnesses. These young people are very high on the Social Ladder and strive to be even higher. They also have high personal power. Students who were named by peers as the “coolest” were also often named the most hurtful and the ones engaging in spreading of rumors.<sup>5</sup>

The objective with these young people is to help them recognize that while being hurtful to and disparaging others may be a way to achieve social dominance, it is not the best way. Encourage these

young people to use their natural leadership skills to be Helpful Allies.

### *Witnesses*

Those who witness these hurtful incidents could play one of three roles:

- **Hurtful Participants.** These young people will align with either kind of young person who is hurtful and will encourage and support their hurtful behavior. They are usually around the same level of social status, but have a lower level of personal power than the ones who are hurtful. The objective with Hurtful Participants is to encourage these young people to recognize the harm to their own reputation and relationships be their association with one who is hurtful and, if possible, try to convince their hurtful friend to stop, own it, and fix it.
- **Passive Observers.** These young people usually do not support the hurtful behavior and wish it would stop, but they generally lack the social status or personal power to do anything.<sup>6</sup> The objective is to help these young people gain greater self-confidence and effective skills to step in to help when they witness hurtful situations, especially privately reaching out to be kind to the one who was treated badly, which is the easiest action to take, and often very effective.
- **Helpful Allies.** Those who do step in to help often are the ones with higher social status and personal power, who also have the social skills to effectively intervene.<sup>7</sup> The objective is to increase the number of young people who are willing and able to positively step in when they witness hurtful situations by increasing their self-confidence and skills.

## **Ways to Promoting Positive Relations**

Based on recent research, the following are the key ways that summer camps can promote more positive relations and reduce bullying.

### **Emphasize Positive Social Norms & Powerful Influences**

The objective is that young people will know that the majority of their peers dislike to see people being hurtful or who support those who are

hurtful and admire those who are kind and respectful, those who step in to help, and those who were hurtful, but who stopped, owned it and fixed it.

When young people understand these social norms held by their peers, they will be more likely to act in accord with those norms by avoiding being hurtful and by stepping in to help.

The challenge that we have to address is that many students think those who bully are “popular.” This is an assessment of their social status. But they are not well-liked. This is an important distinction. We have to change the perceived norms.<sup>8</sup>

To do this, it is best to follow the social norms approach. People act in accord with what they perceive the norms to be. If young people believe that disrespecting others is a way to be perceived as “cool,” they will continue to disrespect others. To change their behavior, it is necessary to emphasize the actual norms.<sup>9</sup>

There also powerful influences that can be used.<sup>10</sup> These influences and the questions that can be asked, are these:

- Reciprocity (Golden Rule). How would you feel if someone did this to you?
- Commitment. What personal values are important to you?
- Social norms. What do others think about those who are hurtful or disrespectful?
- Liking. What do people you like & admire think about those who are hurtful or disrespectful?
- Authority. What would your mom or dad or other adult who you really admire think?
- Scarcity. How might this damage your reputation?

### **Increase Self-Confidence & Resilience**

The objective is to help young people to gain self-confidence and resilience. It is possible to increase resilience using a wide variety of approaches:

- Ensure supportive connections.<sup>11</sup> Connections with adults and other youth.
- Know how to be mindful and self-calm.<sup>12</sup> Teach all young people a simply method to self-calm--take a deep breath, hold, slowly release, repeat 3 times.

- Increase skills in social problem-solving.<sup>13</sup> An effective approach is to identify their goal or what they want to achieve, brainstorm possible strategies, think of possible consequences, pick best strategy to try first, and pick second strategy.
- Focus their attention on good things.<sup>14</sup> Help them to focus on the good things that are happening in their life.
- Build their personal strengths.<sup>15</sup> Help them identify and build their strengths.
- Focus on the future.<sup>16</sup> Focus on future goals and plans to achieve those goals.
- Have a confident physical presence.<sup>17</sup> Standing in a position of strength will reduce stress hormones and increase strength hormones. They can “fake it” (power pose) to “make it” (feel more powerful).

### **Increase Positive Peer Intervention**

The objective is to encourage witnesses to step in to help when they see a hurtful situation by reaching out to be kind, saying “stop,” and reporting serious concerns.

Many young people would like to help when they see someone being hurtful. <sup>18</sup> When young people do intervene, they are often successful in getting the hurtful situations to stop.<sup>19</sup> But publicly confronting someone engaged in bullying presents risks of retaliation or humiliation. Bullied young people who have supportive friends experience less distress.<sup>20</sup> Young people admire those who step in to help.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, when bullying situations do occur, most young people do not step in to help.<sup>22</sup> Very likely, the willingness of witnesses to step in to help is dictated by their position on the Social Ladder, as well as their level of personal power. Those who have a higher social status or personal power face lower risks if they intervene.

The key personal factors related to positive peer intervention include:

- Motivation.<sup>23</sup> Feeling of responsibility for the well-being of others.
- Personal power.<sup>24</sup> Social status and self-confidence.

- Social self-efficacy.<sup>25</sup> Effective skills and self-confidence.
- Perceived barriers.<sup>26</sup> Related to risks associated with intervening.

The key social-environmental factors include:

- Friendships.<sup>27</sup> Young people will support friends. If a friend is being hurt, will support their hurt friend. If a friend is being hurtful, they will support their hurtful friend. If they are friends with both, they may try to resolve the conflict. If they are friends with neither, they may do nothing or help if their personal factors support such intervention.
- Climate of the organization.<sup>28</sup> Adult modeling of the importance of treating all with respect and stepping in to help is necessary.
- Perceived peer norms.<sup>29</sup> This is a very important factor. The key question is whether peers admire those who step in to help. This is another important reason to focus on peer norms.

The three vital steps to increase positive peer intervention are:

- Address their misperceptions to make sure they know that the majority of students dislike bullying and admire those who help.
- Increase their understanding of skills to intervene. Focus on effective skills that will reduce risks and resolve situations. These skills include:
  - Reach Out. Reach out to be kind to someone who has been treated badly or left out and help others think things through or resolve conflict
  - Say, "Stop." Privately help someone who is being hurtful to stop, own it and fix it. If it is safe, publicly tell someone being hurtful to stop
  - Report Concerns. If it is a serious situation, tell an adult who can help
- Ensure a positive climate where staff treat all young people with respect and respond effectively to the situations they witness or are reported.

### **Foster Accountability and Restoration**

The objective is that those who are hurtful will stop, own it and fix it. In other words, stop

themselves from being hurtful, acknowledge their wrongdoing, and take steps to remedy the harm.

It is essential to know that punishment doesn't work.<sup>30</sup> The punishment approach asks: Who did it? What "rule" was broken? How should the offender be punished? This leads to maladaptive response, which includes withdrawal, attacking oneself, or attacking others.

The Restorative Practices approach asks: What is the harm to all parties involved and to the community? What needs to be done to repair harm? Who is responsible for this repair? What needs to occur to prevent similar harm in the future?

To hold young people accountable, they have to accept responsibility for wrongdoing.<sup>31</sup> People create rationalizations to deny responsibility for wrongdoing. The four common rationalizations are:

- Spin It. "It was a prank."
- Deny Personal Responsibility. "Everybody does it."
- Deny the Harm. "What I did wasn't that bad."
- Blame the Victim. "He or she deserved it"

To hold young people accountable requires they "own it"--acknowledge wrongdoing). Help them "own it" by asking questions like Why did you think this was okay? How would you feel if someone did this to you? What would others think?

Ensure they "fix it"--remedy the harm. Promise to discontinue the harm, make things right with the one harmed, and make things right to the community.

## **Strategies in Action**

### **Prevention Activities**

#### *Kick Off Discussion*

Kick-Off discussions can be initiated on the opening day of a session where young people are newly together, such as a summer camp, or simply integrated into the activities of a young organization. Kick-Off Activities should focus on reinforcing positive peer norms, influences for positive behavior, and being a Helpful Ally.

### *Daily Positive Activities*

Daily positive activities can include starting each day or meeting with a focus on self-calming ,sharing recent great happenings, and reporting how they reached out to be kind.

### *Encourage Hurtful Participants to Help Their Friend Stop.*

Many times, those who are hurtful have a group of supporters. Those who participate with one who is Socially Motivated may perceive their social ranking to be linked to their “leader.” Likely one of the more effective strategies to decrease hurtful behavior will be efforts to increase these young people’s understanding of how their collaborative efforts are equally hurtful and their reputation is being damaged, along with strategies they might use to help their hurtful friend stop, own it, and fix it.

### *Increased Support for “At Risk” Youth*

More specific activities are recommended for any young person who is having greater difficulties. This includes both those young people who are more often targeted or excluded, as well as those have been Marginalized. Specific strategies should be put in place to help these young people as soon as the concerns they present are recognized.

### **Effective Interventions**

It is also necessary to ensure that all staff, especially those working directly with young people have insight into how to effectively intervene in a wide variety of lower level kinds of hurtful situations, and know of the need to involve camp leadership for more serious situations.

The kinds of incidents could include witnessing a camper who is being left out or having difficulties, conflict, hurtful incidents that are reported, minor incidents that are witnessed, and major incidents that are reported or witnessed.

For major incidents, the use of an accountability process and agreement that helps campers to recognize and acknowledge their wrongdoing and take steps to remedy the harm is recommended

### ***Be a FRIEND!***

The *Be a FRIEND!* program has been developed by Embrace Civility in the Digital Age to teach young people five critical skills:

- Reach Out. I reach out to be kind to someone who has been treated badly or left out. I help others think things through or resolve conflict.
- Say “Stop.” I help someone who is being hurtful to stop, own it & fix it. If it is safe, I publicly tell someone being hurtful to stop.
- Report Concerns. If it is a serious situation, I tell an adult who can help.
- Stop, Own It & Fix It. I treat others with respect. I stop myself & make things right if I was hurtful.
- Be Positively Powerful. Every day I am becoming even more awesome! can be implemented in two ways, depending on the goals of the organization and the activities young people are involved in.

There are two ways to implement this program. One approach would be more appropriate for shorter day camps and with younger campers. The second approach is more extensive. These activities would be appropriate for organizations that awards pins or badges to young people for accomplishing positive projects.

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