

Working with Children with Difficult Behavior

To manage the behavior of children and youth, you need to be with them. This is why supervision is very important (meaning being able to hear or see the young people at all times).

When you work with young people, remember that you are the adult – it's easy to get sucked into the world of teenagers, don't let that happen. This is one of the reason that two adults always need to be present with any young person (they can help ground you and help you remember that you're not there to be a kid).

Some amazingly wonderful tips and information follows. Most of it is written for camp ministries, but can easily be translated to working with children and youth in a parish setting.

Tips of the Trade

Some article by camp guru Bob Ditter

You them find it here: <http://bobditter.com/2004/07/seven-skills-of-highly-effective-counselors-july-august-2004-2/>

Don't pick up the rope

When campers challenge you, it may be tempting to get into a power struggle with them. I call this the emotional tug of war, with you pulling on one side saying, "Look, I'm the counselor, you have to listen to me!" And a child on the other side saying any of a number of things, like, "I don't make my bed at home, so I don't have to make it here!" When you get into that struggle, you are actually less effective because children are then reacting to your anger or frustration and not your good intentions. They derive great satisfaction knowing they have "gotten" you!

The most effective way to respond when a child "throws us their rope" is not to pick it up! There are a whole host of things children can say that may trigger us, so it is best to be aware of them and practice how to respond. The following are a few examples:

Camper: "You're not my parent...I don't have to listen to you!"

Effective response (spoken calmly): "You're right; I'm not your parent. And... everyone knows that at camp we all help clean up." (Then encourage them and move on!)

Camper: "My parents pay a lot of money for me to come to this camp! I can do what I want!"

Effective response (again, spoken as calmly as you can): "I'm glad your parents are able to send you here. That's great! And...you and I both know (remember this phrase, you can use it over and over) that your parents didn't send you here to be wild. And...everybody knows that part of camp is cleaning up; helping out; going to activities; etc." Then move on!

The most important part of "don't pick up the rope" is staying calm. This takes some practice. Make it a game with yourself—that you refuse to let a camper push your button. If they succeed, they win and you lose! (Actually, if they succeed in "pushing your button," everybody loses!) Also, responding with a sarcastic comeback, while tempting, only encourages many campers to prolong the argument. Sarcasm is just another way of picking up the rope!

Enter their world

One of the reasons campers do not comply with counselor requests is because they are actually looking to engage you. Behind this desire for attention is a longing for adults to take an interest in their world—their reality. For example, if you encounter a camper sitting on their bed playing a game or reading a book when they should be cleaning up, instead of simply barking orders, you might take a moment to be interested in what they are doing. This is like seizing the opportunity to gain a window into their world—their interests, concerns and so on. A few moments spent looking at something together in a kind of momentary "time out" with a camper may eventually result in much more compliance on their part.

In this day of instant messaging, cell phones, weblogs and other technical ways of "being connected," many children long for the simple attentions of a real, present, interested adult.

State your expectations and detach

This is an especially effective technique to use with Teens, though it works equally well with younger children. The technique has four steps, as follows: 1) When a camper is not complying with a request, like getting to an activity on time or pitching in to do their part of clean-up, state what you expect clearly and simply. 2) Avoid getting into an argument (picking up the rope!) when the camper complains or tries arguing. Remember, most children would rather argue with you than do what it is they are supposed to do. 3) Restate your expectation, simply and without responding to any arguments being thrown your way. 4) Detach. This means walk away! Move on to your next task or the next camper and leave the camper you just spoke with to deal with the dilemma of defying you. If they do defy you, go to skill #7 below.

Redirect

This technique is used by all parents, day care teachers, school professionals—in short, just about anyone who works with children. When you find campers engaging in some kind of play or activity that is potentially harmful or dangerous or emotionally hurtful to someone else, try redirecting or channeling their energies into a different activity. In other words, capitalize on their momentum and simply move it into an activity that is interesting, but less risky.

At rest hour, for example, left to their own devices, many campers tease one another or get noisy and restless. Creating quiet chess, checker or card game tournaments can help keep campers occupied in ways that are a change from the hectic pace of camp, but still engaging.

Make campers “right” about what they are “right” about

Many times campers will try to avoid doing what they are asked by engaging us in an argument. Children today seem especially adept at this diversionary practice, so you need something that works. The most effective way to deal with this is to make campers “right” about what they are right about. For example, if a camper complains about it being too hot, and uses this as an excuse not to do their chore, agree with the part that is “right,” as follows: “You’re right! It is hot!” Pause for a moment and let this sink in, then continue: “and...we still have to clean up!” Campers may not like your response any better, but it will help you stay out of an argument and move on.

Separate a camper from their audience

There are times when campers may become highly provocative or resistant to counselor instructions. If you feel a camper is having an especially difficult time, taking them away from their group (or having their group move on without them with another adult to supervise them) may help them settle down. Sometimes campers “play to an audience,” and other times they may simply feel less secure and more threatened in front of their peers. In either case, separating them from their group may help.

Getting back to respect

When a camper refuses to do something that is expected of all campers, such as cleaning up, listening to a counselor or going to activities, it often helps to take them aside to speak with them. Once you and the camper are somewhat away from the group, say, “I have asked you, in a respectful way, to listen to me (or whatever the request is). Are you telling me that if I ask you in a respectful way, you are going to refuse me?” Then be silent and wait. If the camper is still defiant or provocative, it is time to go to your supervisor with your camper and say, in front of the camper, “I have asked Jason in a respectful way to (name the request—clean up; go to their activity on time; listen while I am speaking to the others; etc.) and he/she has refused.” Your supervisor should then verify this with your camper in front of you. “Is this true, Jason? Is it true that Mike, your counselor, has asked you to (name the request), and they have done it in a respectful way, and you have refused?”

What this approach does is cool the situation down, enlist the support of your supervisor (without you giving up your position as the camper’s primary care-taker) and move the discussion to a higher-stakes level. Most campers comply or begin talking about what they need in order to comply. Campers who are still defiant at this point might need further intervention with the camp director or in a conference call with parents, arranged not by you, but by your supervisor.

Summary

In looking at these skills it is important to remember three things. First, campers will more likely watch and emulate to what you do rather than listen to what you say. Whether you know it or not, you are a powerful role model. Behave the way you want your campers to behave. Second, keep your cool! Young or inexperienced counselors think the louder they scream or the more forcefully they speak to campers, the more in awe of them campers will be. This backfires. Power with children comes through influence, not force. Third, have reasonable expectations. In the short time you have with campers you may be able only to manage their behavior, not change it. The skills above are designed to help you do this. Like any other set of skills, the more you practice, the better you will become. Mastering skills with children not only helps them grow, it helps everyone get more of the good there is to get out of camp.

More Tips

Phrasing in the Positive

We often tell children what we do *not* want them to do rather than giving them a clear indication, or picture, of what it is we *do* want them to do. Stating our expectations in the negative (e.g., "Don't run!" "No hitting!" "Don't take things that don't belong to you!") has three undesirable effects as follows:

1. In a child's mind it implies that we assume they are guilty before they have had a chance to show us otherwise, almost as if we expect them to misbehave, which erodes the trust level between us;
2. It suggests the very behavior we want to avoid by naming it out loud, thus creating the mental image of it; and
3. We fail to give a clear, positive picture of what the desirable behavior would look like.

Stating things in the positive, not the negative, is one helpful practice to develop working with children. (From Bob Ditter's "Trail Signs and Compass Points")



Saying vs. Showing

We often over focus on *what* children say to the point where we miss their affect or emotion. Non-verbal cues – the tone of voice, facial expressions and so on – are powerful communicators. We miss a tremendous amount of valuable information when we overlook signs of emotions in children, which has two undesirable effects, as follows

1. We may misinterpret a statement or behavior because we are not "reading" the child correctly.
2. We miss the opportunity to make children aware of their own affect, which is a basic ability in developing emotional intelligence.

Regressive pull

This is the influence children have on our behavior that comes from working with them intensely and especially in groups. In other words, **if you spend enough time with children, you start to look & act just like they do.**

It's an "occupational hazard – be aware!!!

Parallel process

We treat each other & the campers the way we want them to treat each other and us.

Bullying

Bullying is when

a person(s) upsets or creates a risk to another person's health and safety either psychologically or physically
or their property, reputation or social acceptance
on more than one occasion.

Types of bullying: *There are three broad categories of bullying.*

- Direct physical bullying e.g. hitting, tripping, and pushing or damaging their property.
- Direct verbal bullying e.g. name calling, insults, homophobic or racist remarks, verbal abuse.
- Indirect bullying - This form of bullying is harder to recognize and often carried out behind the bullied student's back. It is designed to harm someone's social reputation and/or cause humiliation. Indirect bullying includes:
 - lying and spreading rumors
 - playing nasty jokes to embarrass and humiliate
 - mimicking
 - encouraging others to socially exclude someone
 - damaging someone's social reputation and social acceptance
 - cyber-bullying, which involves the use of email, text messages or chat rooms to humiliate and distress.



What bullying is not: Many distressing behaviors are not examples of bullying even though they are unpleasant and often require teacher intervention and management.

There are three socially unpleasant situations that are often confused with bullying:

- **Mutual conflict** - In mutual conflict situations, there is an argument or disagreement between students but not an imbalance of power. Both parties are upset and usually both want a resolution to the problem. However, unresolved mutual conflict sometimes develops into a bullying situation with one person becoming targeted repeatedly for 'retaliation' in a one-sided way.
- **Social rejection or dislike** - Unless the social rejection is directed towards someone specific and involves deliberate and repeated attempts to cause distress, exclude or create dislike by others, it is not bullying.
- **Single-episode acts of nastiness or meanness, or random acts of aggression or intimidation** - Single episodes of nastiness or physical aggression are not the same as bullying. If a student is verbally abused or pushed on one occasion they are not being bullied.

Nastiness or physical aggression that is directed towards many different students is not the same as bullying.

However, since the camp has a duty of care to provide a student with a safe and supportive school environment, single episodes of nastiness or physical aggression should not be ignored or condoned.

Hazing

"Hazing" means an

intentional, knowing, or reckless act by a person(s) that is **directed against an individual** and that the person knew or should have known **endangers the physical health or safety of the individual**, and that is done for **the purpose of maintaining membership in any organization.**

Hazing includes any of the following that is done for such a purpose:

- Physical brutality, such as whipping, beating, striking, branding, electronic shocking, placing of a harmful substance on the body, or similar activity.
- Physical activity, such as sleep deprivation, exposure to the elements, confinement in a small space, or calisthenics, that subjects the other person to an unreasonable risk of harm or that adversely affects the physical health or safety of the individual.
- Activity involving consumption of a food, liquid, alcoholic beverage, liquor, drug, or other substance that subjects the individual to an unreasonable risk of harm or that adversely affects the physical health or safety of the individual.
- Activity that induces, causes, or requires an individual to perform a duty or task that involves the commission of a crime or an act of hazing.

(adapted from <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>)