

## Friend or Foe? Preventing Peer-to-Peer Abuse at Camp

As outdated as the notion might be, the reality is most of us have grown up conditioned on the “Stranger Danger” philosophy – a slogan taught to children for decades to emphasize the potential threat posed by strangers. As we know all too well, this one blanket statement doesn’t fit all possible scenarios, especially in the camp setting. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 80-91% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child knows or trusts. Summer camps are often experts at creating safe, welcoming spaces with trustworthy reputations. The unfortunate truth, however, is that abuse can take place in any environment, so camp professionals must remain hyper-focused around continuously strengthening their prevention efforts.

Often underemphasized in the past, incidents of peer-to-peer abuse has been on the rise - especially throughout the past two years of navigating and dealing with challenges from the pandemic. The American Camp Association (ACA) Crisis Hotline reported that 21% of their calls from 2021 were related to allegations of abuse – 60% of which were peer-to-peer incidents.

We have emerged from the pandemic, especially our youth, craving affection and appropriate touch. We in the camping industry must update how we prepare our staff to identify and prevent abuse as well as teach youth about and practice positive social interaction and respect for boundary setting. The good news is there are a few concrete steps you can take to place greater focus on the increased prevalence of peer-to-peer abuse and strengthen your prevention practices. Implement the strategies below to strengthen yours starting today!

### Three strategies to strengthen efforts for peer-to-peer abuse prevention:

- 1. Clearly define expectations.** It’s easy for an overused term like “red-flag behavior” to lose its meaning and resonance. A sure-fire way to identify suspect behavior or possible abuse at camp and to hit the messaging all the way home with your staff is to describe red-flag behavior as any violation of boundaries, camp policies and rules. To ensure absolute clarity on this, you must first clearly define expectations around appropriate touch and affection, personal boundaries and established camp rules. Not every broken rule at camp should cause concern for signs of abuse. But when you have someone in your camp who intends to hurt a child, whether it’s another camper or an adult, common behavior often includes breaking boundaries, pushing policies or refusing to follow your camp’s rules. Establishing and defining clear expectations around the rules and culture of your camp will greatly help your staff identify patterns of behavior and address the situation earlier. It’s important to help your staff understand it’s unlikely they would ever catch someone in the act of abusing another person. Rather, they can catch them in a pattern of breaking the rules.
- 2. Consistently apply accountability.** Another step in strengthening your prevention practices to reduce the potential for peer-to-peer abuse is to apply consistent thresholds for when to hold someone accountable for breaking your camp’s rules. Just like with toddlers, both adults and peers with ill intent will continue to push your boundaries to see how far they can go. Eventually, some will push to the point of starting to violate the boundaries of personal space with inappropriate touch. This same concept can be applied to bullies at camp. You may have a policy that states bullying will not be tolerated. But how do you hold bullies accountable and how much leeway will you give? You won’t always catch campers in the act of bullying, but you will first start to see them push the boundaries and rules. To best prevent abuse, it is imperative to ensure a camp culture where everyone, campers and staff, are held accountable and inappropriate behavior is compassionately called out.
- 3. Ensure engaged camper supervision.** Often, peer-to-peer abuse among campers is opportunistic, occurring when campers have a sense of privacy, like during changing times, unstructured rest periods or when normal conflict between campers escalates to more damaging behaviors. Greater societal demand for children to “get back to normal activities” combined with the likelihood of having fewer staff to rely on due to a tightening labor

market have created a perfect storm for increasing the opportunity for abuse. The third, final and perhaps most important step for best preventing peer-to-peer abuse is providing active or engaged camper supervision. Do campers feel comfortable reaching out for help if they are experiencing abuse, or if they witness abuse by others? How well are staff and counselors communicating with each other about warning signs they may be seeing? Knowing what we know about peer-to-peer abuse, we must train our staff to focus on and effectively manage times and locations when and where the risk is highest. Engaged supervision is a critical camp component. At its heart, engaged supervision is about shifting the paradigm from watching campers to actively engaging and communicating with them so they stay engaged with you. This keeps staff attention on campers, and it prevents campers from seeking other experiences or activities where inappropriate, red flag behavior or boundary pushing may occur.

Gone are the days of assuming that only strangers are dangerous and only adults can be predators; youth must now be equipped to identify patterns of behavior, rule breaking and boundary pushing to help determine if someone, adult or peer, is a friend or foe. Multiple steps can be taken to provide staff with tools to help prevent incidents of peer-to-peer abuse in your camp programs. Reflect on your camp's approach to clearly defining red flag behavior, apply consistent accountability for when rules or boundaries are crossed and empower campers to speak up or intervene through regular check-ins with their counselors. Those actions, along with hiring staff committed to providing engaged supervision, are the keys to success and will improve your overall efforts regarding camper safety and abuse prevention.

The risk of sexual abuse is real. Visit [churchmutual.com/abuse](https://churchmutual.com/abuse) to learn more about this highly sensitive topic and what your organization can do to proactively reduce risk.

For information about insurance for your camp or YMCA, contact Michael Labadorf CPCU, Executive Vice President at 516-247-5850 or email him at [Michael.Labadorf@bbrown.com](mailto:Michael.Labadorf@bbrown.com)