

Sexual Inappropriateness at Camp



Written by Gwenn Kudler Gelfand, L.C.S.W.

To a great degree, over the past academic year children have returned to school and social activities, and life has resumed some sense of normalcy. Yet our children have lost out on several years of “just being kids” and enjoying the simple pleasures of life, especially being with family and friends. A summer at camp is exactly what is often recommended for children and has been the subject of a great number of recent articles.

The COVID-19 Fallout

Camps this summer, however, are seeing the post-pandemic fallout of Covid which has raised a great deal of concern. Campers have had an incredible amount of unsupervised time over the past few years. Many parents have been working at home while their kids have also been home while activities were cancelled. Consequently, the kids spent more time on electronic devices and using social media.

Adolescent Information Overload

Many argue that the Covid pandemic is essentially over. It isn't, and its effects certainly aren't over. One can argue that social media was important in keeping kids socially connected during the pandemic, but one can also argue that it has given our youth too much information at too young an age. A consequence of being at home more, often unsupervised, is that they have kept busy on the Internet for hours each day or watching sexually charged TV shows like Euphoria without the proper guidance or ability to process their new sexual feelings and sexual awareness.

This past week alone, we have received calls from almost a dozen camps with concerns about sexual misconduct by campers. Many campers have exhibited inappropriate sexual behavior, and an increase in sexual discussions has been observed. There have been reports to us of incidents regarding inappropriate sexual touching including: campers fingering other campers' buttocks; campers touching campers' and counselors' private parts over clothing; and, campers being disrespectful and inappropriate towards counselors in pranks of a sexual nature. It appears that this may be occurring more towards counselors of different races and ethnicity from the campers. These incidents came out in bunk meetings, or campers wrote home, or counselors reported them to directors.

Is there a racial component to this sexual conduct? Are our campers being exposed by the media to things that are not racially or ethnically appropriate? These questions cause a great deal of tension and concern, especially in the camping community. The camps in question are in different states and represent campers from different socioeconomic brackets. Their clientele is very different.

What they have in common are sexually charged campers that are acting out inappropriately in the wake of their pandemic isolation. These campers have finally been allowed to return to previous experiences like camp. However, they now attend in a very different emotional state.

We can argue that much of this behavior is misplaced sexual tension and exposure. But, how much is based on how social media romanticizes and normalizes such behavior? How much responsibility have we given to social media? And, how much of this behavior is a result of an increase in mental illness in general? Regardless of the cause, we now have a problem on our hands and need to focus on how to address the situation.

Additional Training Needed for Camps

Camps have previously discussed sexually inappropriate behavior in counselor trainings. Conversations with kids regarding “good touch” and “bad touch” were started at early ages by parents and schools. Most camps have a code of conduct involving keeping your hands to yourself and no tolerance for touching others’ private parts.

But what was once obvious, is no longer sufficient. We need to become more aware and alert to this change of behavior and disrespect for authority and society’s sexual norms. In several camps, counselors are asking for cultural sensitivity training for campers and suggesting that counselor manuals need to be changed to address these issues. At this late date in the summer, it appears that fires need to be put out one-by-one. However, in planning for future summers, it may be important to address these issues on a wider scale. Future newsletters in the Fall will discuss prevention and planning strategies for summer 2023 and suggestions on how to educate campers and staff on these new challenges.



About the author: Gwenn is a licensed certified social worker with more than 30 years of experience working with children and adolescents, with a specialty in kids in crisis. She received a Bachelor of Social Work from Cornell University and a Master of Social Work from Columbia University. Gwenn has been an integral part of the Brown & Brown Camp Crisis Response Team and has received rave reviews from the many camps she has helped at their time of need.

