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Talking Points

How to help staff members navigate difficult conversations with campers

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By Jonathan Caflun

Photos: Camp Wekeela

This past year has been challenging, unexpected, and explosive in many ways. During the pandemic, the United States experienced a global-health crisis while still reckoning with racial, social, and political unrest, social isolation, and anxieties that will remain for decades. Social media amplified what children and young people were exposed to and what they experienced in real time. Children saw horrifying and gruesome images of police brutality that killed George Floyd, spurring nationwide protests in support of Black Lives Matter. They were likely exposed to a barrage of political ads on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Youtube during the 2020 presidential election. The January 6 attack by domestic terrorists on the Capitol left the country—and the world—in shock.

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Thinking of children as naïve, innocent, and unable to have difficult conversations is over.

While camp is a place where kids can meet new friends, engage in different activities, and even escape temporarily from the pressures of the everyday world, camp can also serve a larger purpose—one that enriches a child's knowledge and resilience. Removing a phone from a child does not mean removing the thoughts, feelings, and fears that come from disturbing events.

Tapping Into Resources

To get a better idea of the role that camps can play to

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help the community at large, I spoke with Robert Brooks, a clinical psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical Center and author of numerous books, including *Raising Resilient Children*. We examined the many ways in which camps can be a "therapeutic" environment to help children understand and process traumatic events—especially those conveyed through the lens of social media. In particular, we discussed whether summer camps should provide a place for kids to discuss what is occurring in the world rather than try to provide an escape from it. Ultimately, according to Brooks, the answer comes down to staff members and several key elements.

"For kids to hear that they have some of the same questions and concerns as their peers can be very therapeutic," Brooks says. "It helps them to feel they are not alone, and it validates what they are experiencing. How effective this conversation will be ultimately comes down to the staff."

Staff members must feel comfortable having these types of discussions and must be able to empathize with, listen to, and have compassion for others. This raises important questions:

- How well-trained are staff members?

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- Is there a system in place where staff can ask their own questions if they are uncertain what to say or how to respond to campers' comments and questions
- What is the support, supervision, etc. for staff members?
- What are the issues worth talking about that will stimulate conversation, not arguments?

While camps and schools are different, Brooks says he has been asked similar questions by teachers about what topics are permissible to discuss in classrooms and whether special training is required. Some teachers believe such discussions at a middle- and high-school level are best confined to social studies and history classes. At all grade levels, some teachers are concerned that discussions about these topics will open up a variety of emotions among students and that teachers aren't "trained as therapists."

Camps aren't asking staff members to be therapists. Instead, they are called upon to create a positive environment that lowers anxiety and creates cohesion. As Dr. Brooks says, "If you have an elephant in the room that no one is acknowledging, it's still there and will interfere with learning and experiencing joy in different activities."

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Applying This Knowledge

At Camp Wekeela in Hartford, Mass., staff felt it was important to address three major concerns during the summer of 2020:

1. COVID-19, Anxiety, And Related Concerns

Staff members were trained not only to implement safety measures that are important to stopping the spread of COVID-19, but also to speak to campers about any related trauma or fears. When campers arrived in July 2020, many

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came from what were considered (at the time) to be “hot spots”—New York, New Jersey, Florida, and California. Many campers and staff members may have had a friend or family member contract the virus and become seriously ill, possibly even die. Combined with months of isolation, campers had their own fears about coming to camp and leaving their families at home. One child admitted he felt “guilty” for coming to camp when he didn’t know if his parents would become sick from COVID-19. Being able to empathize with and speak to campers about their concerns—especially when leaving camp to return to the real world—was challenging. In the case of the child who felt guilty, it was important to be in constant communication with his family, provide updates, and ensure that anxiety did not impede his camp experience.

2. The Racial Equality Conversation

During 2020 staff training, we grappled with two ongoing dilemmas. Staff members arrived for a two-week mandatory quarantine period due to COVID-19. They also arrived at camp shortly after the U.S. was swept over by nationwide protests for racial equality. Many members did not have an outlet to discuss these issues with others due to the pandemic. The camp felt it was important to allow for these conversations. To do this, a few hours were set aside to talk about race and inequality in America as part of staff

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training. The session allowed minority staff to illuminate and illustrate their own feelings and concerns that other staff members may not have realized. It also gave staff a basis of understanding if and when campers brought up similar issues. All in all, the session was a huge success.

3. The 2020 Election

Due to international border closures, the majority of 2020 staff members were American. This presented an interesting opportunity for discussions about the presidential election. Research suggests that young voters (ages 18 to 30) vote far less often than any other generation. By serving a community of staff members largely comprised

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of this age group, the camp felt it had a responsibility to at least educate and engage staff members on their rights and options in voting. While never discussing personal beliefs or political debate between candidates, the camp wanted to help staff members understand simple and important procedures: how and where to register and the deadlines to vote. The camp hoped that staff members would register during the summer (which many did). Then a "WekeelaVotes" campaign was started, urging staff members, alumni, and parents to commit to voting in the election. This was not to espouse specific political beliefs, but to encourage the community to participate in the most important franchise in our society—exercising the right to vote.

Ultimately, camps should consider giving members of their community a place to ask questions about pressing current issues and have a "council" of help. While parents are essential in teaching campers to be resilient and ready for success, schools and camps can also play a significant role. According to Brooks, a key feature of resilience is housed in what he calls "personal control," that is, focusing time and energy on what can be changed rather than on what is beyond our control. While we may not have control over the appearance of certain events such as COVID-19, we do have more control than we realize over our attitude and response to the disease, including wearing face masks and social distancing. Camps can help kids see there are possible solutions to many problems with which they grapple—even kids who have experienced past trauma and feel more

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vulnerable when confronted with current disruptive events. Fostering a community where campers and staff members feel they have a voice—a voice that is listened to and respected—can be incredibly uplifting and, sometimes, life-altering. Just like any other business, camps have a platform and a voice. It is important to use this voice as a force of good and change.

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