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Summer camps stepping up with better bully prevention methods

By *LEANNE ITALIE*

The Associated Press

At 16, Kayla Robbins will soon head off for her ninth summer at a sleep-away camp, not far from home in Concord.

This year, she'll spend much of her time as a junior staffer and is looking forward to helping little kids learn to swim.

She said camp has always been a welcome break. "It's like going on vacation from all the bad drama stuff at school," she said.

But for other kids, "drama" may not be so far behind. Summer camps must contend with a problem that has long bedeviled schools: bullying.

About 10 million kids will attend day or overnight camp this summer after the final clang of the school bell, facing new peer groups and settings that can invite conflict. In the shower house, when campers are vulnerable, or at lights out, when counselors might be outside of earshot, bullying arises despite generally improved adult-to-kid ratios and better monitoring of unsupervised moments, when savvy bullies are apt to strike.

In Newton, Mass., Felicia Falchuk's 9-year-old daughter will soon begin her second summer of sleep-away camp in a different New Hampshire program. When she and her husband picked it, they were looking for a zero-tolerance policy "for not being nice."

"At school, a teacher or someone on the playground only has so much time and so much ability to deal with it," Falchuk said, recalling one camper she saw when she and her husband toured the camp who was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with: "Camp Evergreen, where being a good friend is the most important thing."

That, Falchuk said, "ultimately is what camp's all about. Learning to live with other kids, respect and acceptance, independence and resilience. At school, a teacher only has so much time and so much ability to deal with it."

According to a 2009 American Camp Association survey, 54 percent of responding camps said problem behaviors overall were one of the important issues they handled in the previous three years. In 2007, 52 percent responded that way.

Years ago, camp directors and their counselors might not have been so quick to acknowledge such problems. Now, many camps hire anti-bully experts to help out.

Renee Flax has spoken to thousands of New York-area parents as a camp placement adviser for the association that offers parents the comfort of accreditation. She wishes more would take care when choosing a camp for their kids.

Rarely, she said, "does the conversation of bullying come up" when parents seek her advice. "When people are looking for a camp, they tend to be much more focused on activities," Flax said. "I actually push them in the direction of what the camp community is all about."

"You have a camp director who's making a policy decision. This is their domain. This isn't public school. You're picking something that has a philosophy that is directing everything that they're doing."

If a child is being picked on or bullied in "most aspects of their life, then something is going on a camp director should know about," she said. "If you find that your child has often been the victim, that's a conversation you really need to have with a camp director."

Psychologist Joel Haber, who calls himself the "bully coach" and works with camps to identify hot spots and plan responses, said more camps are "jumping on board," sending home chronic problem children more than ever before, for instance.

"There's been a significant shift that if this is an issue they get out in front of on Day 1 they can deal with it a lot better," he said. "It's going to happen whether they believe it or not."

Kim Storey, a Harvard-trained educator, also works on bullying awareness and counselor training during staff orientation periods just before children arrive for the summer. She said some camps get it more than others.

"I speak to these groups of counselors, usually between 18 and 22," she said. "They're very young. I look out at this sea of faces and they have no idea why they should be listening to me and why this is important. They're more interested in seeing their old friends or how they'll fit into the camp themselves, and I have to wake them up."

"They're really still kids themselves, but within a day or two they're going to be confronted by hundreds of campers."

With so much of camp life focused on athletic ability or prowess in other areas, de-emphasizing winning over losing has helped less agile kids become prey, she said, noting one camp that dropped colored wristbands to denote their swimming level.

Other camps mix up cabins at mealtime, posting more adults at each table, and hire staff to accompany groups of kids moving from one activity to another rather than let them walk short distances themselves. Many draw bunkmates into the bullying conversation, allowing them to weigh in on the group's goals in dealing with each other for the season.

"It's a balance," said Catriona Sangster, a co-director of Camp Wawenock for girls in southern Maine. "We firmly believe that with kids, you have to balance helping them learn to manage relationships and issues on their own without intervening and not allowing something that's detrimental to go on. There's a lot more intentionality in everything we do."

Michael Marcus, director of Camp Greylock, a top sports camp for boys in the Berkshire mountains of western Massachusetts, assigns teams and bunks and separates cabins for dining to help dilute an "us versus them" mentality.

"In camp, doing everything together is hard," he said. "We're extremely structured. Extremely focused. The theory is if you do nothing, bad things happen."