

What Conversations Are Appropriate?

Ten Guidelines for Bunk Counselors © Moving Traditions 2018

Notes:

Our over-riding question for these guidelines is:

How do we help counselors and campers to be part of a shared process of change at camp that generates new shared norms that offer more respect, dignity, and safety for all campers?

These guidelines work best when they are modified for each specific camp culture. We ask that as you plan for staff training that you think: How would I modify the guidelines? What policies and procedure do I need to have in effect to support these guidelines? What is missing? How will we convey these during staff training? How will counselors convey these ideas to their campers?

How do we help counselors and campers to be part of a shared process of change at camp that generates new shared norms that offer more respect, dignity, and safety for all campers?

1. Protect each camper's right to privacy.

There is very little privacy in a bunk setting. That said, campers need some space to do things that they might see as personal- to go to the bathroom in peace, to change their clothes, and to tend to their bodies' needs in other ways without commentary from other campers. Speak positively about how the bunk values this basic level of personal privacy. It is o.k. to say, "**Respect people's personal space**" If a camper is doing things that are generally considered to be private in a "public" manner, it is your role to reinforce the basic level of personal privacy. One way to convey this is to have campers and counselors create a set of bunk rules on the first night that address this issue among others. This can help give the campers ownership and power over their space which helps them follow the rules.

2. Challenge sexualized and sexist comments that campers or counselors make about campers or counselors.

As a counselor it is your role to say that camp is a place where we respect everyone's right to explore, express, and have fun without being judged by either gendered or sexual expectations. Be aware of the way that people who do not conform to dominant gender norms are being talked about. Be aware of how boys and girls who conform more to gender expectations are talked about. Be aware of the ways that actual or assumed promiscuity or any sexual activity is being vilified or glorified. If someone is being talked about, or campers are being ranked, it is o.k. to say: **"We don't talk about people that way at camp"** Engage campers in conversations about this kind of speech and the effect it can have on others.

3. Notice when a camper is using sexualized talk to get attention.

Some campers will push boundaries - and start conversations or make public remarks that make other campers feel very uncomfortable. Often this is done to be funny or popular. If you hear a conversation that has become sexually explicit and is making some campers uncomfortable, it is o.k. to say: **"O.K. next topic please"** Discourage any forms of "sexual competition." If you overhear a camper boasting about a hook-up or sexual act, help that camper to reflect on why they were boasting and think of other ways that they might act after a hook-up. If they continue to do any of the above, bring this to the attention of your direct supervisor or camper care staff because there are likely underlying reasons for this behavior.

What Do You Do When Campers Ask You About Things of a Sexual Nature?

4. Maintain privacy about your sexual experiences or desires.

The details of your personal sexual experiences - your current activity and your history - good and bad - are not something that you should be sharing with a child or a teen. If you need to find someone to talk to about your sex life or sexual history, find an adult that you trust. This is also true if you simply have a crush on someone - speaking with a camper about a specific person who you find attractive places indirect pressure on a camper. You may be tempted to tell a camper about your sexual experiences, but since everyone's journey is different, your story might unintentionally place unrealistic expectations on the camper or induce stress or fear in an unhealthy way. You can always find ways to communicate the camp's values regarding gender and sexuality without speaking of your particular sexual experiences, desires, or fantasies.

For example: if a camper asks a counselor, "Are you a virgin?" "Where did that hickie come from?" "Who do you have a crush on?"

The counselor can answer: **(each camp should fill in the answer for their camp based on their policies, designated staff people, age of campers and staff, etc.)**

Note: This privacy guideline does not imply that you need to be closeted about your sexual orientation or gender identity, just about your sexual behavior.

5. Be conscious of not creating pressure on campers to be sexual

Campers are looking to you for approval. Sometimes younger campers will share a crush or an experience of flirting, or an older camper will tell you something of a sexual nature to try to impress you or to see if you agree with it. Often, social events at camp create an expectation that campers will go with a date and feel pressure to do something with that date that they might not want to do but that seem part of camp tradition. Often, they are looking for your approval. While you may have an instinct to encourage them, your encouragement might actually be experienced as a form of social pressure. When a camper starts to divulge, you might say:

"No one should feel pressure to do something physical that they aren't sure that they want to do. What's most important is that you and the other person are on the same page, are treating one another respectfully and feel comfortable and safe. And that you're not engaging in any acts that can get you sent home."

6. Correct misconceptions or falsehoods about sex or sexuality with impersonal responses.

If you are in a situation where campers are sharing falsehoods in the moment with other campers regarding simple facts about bodies and sexual activity, you may choose to intervene to simply correct the falsehood. Do this in a way that does not lead to campers interviewing you about your sex life and your attitudes about sex. It is much better to speak in terms of ***"actually, what I learned in sex ed is that _____."*** Learn who else at camp can address these basic issues regarding health - a camper care professional, nurse, or social worker may have expertise in this area and refer the campers to them or get the information yourself from them to share with the camper.

7. Stress friendship and fun as the goal of camp

The best way to reduce the pressure that campers feel to engage in inappropriate touch is to give them ways to positively interact physically with others that have clear boundaries. No

one should feel like there is any expectation in terms of engaging in sexual activity or declaring their sexual orientation at camp. For younger campers, they should not have to "like" anyone or express feelings about who they think is attractive. In particular, it is important to avoid language that assumes that campers are attracted to the "opposite sex" - this creates an unsafe environment for campers who are questioning their sexuality or identifying internally or openly as LGBTQ or who identify as asexual. For older campers they should not feel pressure to have physical contact - touching, kissing, stroking, hugging, etc. - with anyone in an intimate manner.

What Should You Do If You Hear About or See a Camper Engaging in Sexual Activity?

8. Know Your Camp Policies and Discuss Your Concern with Senior Staff

Be sure you know what camp policies about the following: masturbation, sexual activity between staff, sexual activity among campers (which includes hugging, kissing, French kissing, petting, feeling someone else's body with clothes on, putting hands under your own clothes or someone else's). If there is anything you don't understand or agree with be sure to address it with your supervisor during orientation so you know how to handle situations as they arise. If you hear about campers engaging in romantic or sexual behaviors that are against camp policy, speak to a supervisor about your concerns and get clarity about how you should respond to the specific situation.

9. Take issues of consent, self-disclosures or rumors seriously

If you hear about a camper who is compelling, either by force or through social pressure, another camper to do something of a sexual nature, it is your responsibility to protect the camper under threat. Even if you think that this "might" be happening, you should speak about it with the appropriate staff supervisor as soon as possible. If a camper discloses past sexual abuse to you, first thank them for trusting you, affirm that you believe them and tell them they are safe at camp and you will get them help. Then report it to your supervisor or designated senior staff.

Talk about everyday consent in your dealings with campers. Making sure campers are aware of consent issues in non-sexual situations is helpful.

10. Consider the ways that a camp social worker, nurse, rabbi, or other trusted adult might help you.

If you feel like your bunk could benefit from the expertise of a trained staff member who could help you resolve issues and/or address concerns or specific behaviors about sexuality, speak to your supervisor about creating this opportunity. Consider the benefit to you and your bunk of asking for help to address the concerns you have. This is a mark of maturity. You are not expected to have all the answers yourself.

Notes for Jewish educators:

Below are some Jewish value concepts that are connected to the guidelines above:

- Challenge sexualized and sexist comments that campers or counselors make about campers or counselors - tochecha/l'shon hara
- Protect each camper's right to privacy -reshut hayachid
- Notice when a camper is using sexualized talk to get attention - tochecha/l'shon hara
- Maintain privacy about your sexual experiences or desires - Hazneh Telech/story of Rav Kahanah (different versions) - Derekh Eretz)
- Notice when a camper is turning to you to divulge personal encounters of a sexual nature -Eitzah Tovah/Moreh Derekh
- Correct misconceptions or falsehoods about sex or sexuality with impersonal responses - Da'at
- Take issues of consent seriously. - haskamah/(Rebeccah and Eliezer)