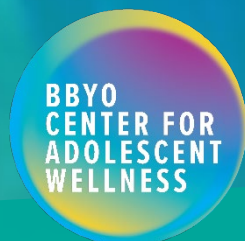


IMPLEMENTING MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH BEST PRACTICES AT CAMP HOW AND WHAT TO CONSIDER



I. INTRODUCTION

Looking at the statistics surrounding mental health challenges in youth, it is no wonder that mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health (MESSH) continues to be a top issue for day and overnight camps.

- 1 in 6 youth will experience a mental health challenge by the age of 18.¹
- 50% of all mental health challenges begin by age 14 and 75% by age 24.²
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 10–34.³

These statistics continue to rise as the impacts of the pandemic persist, with 44% of teens reporting they felt hopeless in the previous year⁴, and 40% of high school students reporting that they felt so sad or hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year.⁵ Additionally, camps are seeing campers and staff who are not meeting developmental milestones previously seen in their age groups, who are struggling with “controlling behaviors”— coping skills or behaviors whose purpose is to make up for feelings of a lack of control like self-harming, disordered eating, and substance abuse—as well as increases in depression and anxiety.

Over the last decade, MESSH has emerged as an important field in camp programs, and in recent years it has only become more vital to daily camp operations and functionality. This manual provides some guidance on best practices to address MESSH challenges in a camp environment to help better support campers and staff, proactively prepare for challenges and crises, and create a thriving and vibrant community.

This guidebook was created as an accompaniment to the [BBYO Center for Adolescent Wellness’](#) (BBYO-CAW) Camp Wellness Assessment tool, made possible by a partnership between Foundation for Jewish Camp and BBYO-CAW through the [Yedid Nefesh initiative](#) generously supported by The Marcus Foundation. Camps in the Yedid Nefesh initiative are eligible to take the assessment.

All camps can benefit from this guidebook to help enhance their policies, procedures, and training to achieve MESSH best practices. It is recommended that camps using the guide also connect with [BBYO-CAW](#) to complete the assessment process.

¹ National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Mental Health By The Numbers,” <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>.

² National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Mental Health By The Numbers,” <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>.

³ National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Mental Health By The Numbers,” <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20new%20data,hopeless%20during%20the%20past%20year>, Released 3/30/22. This data was collected during the first six months of 2021.

⁵ Youth Risk Behavior Survey – Data Summary and Trends Report, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011 – 2021, released February 13, 2023.

II. BEST PRACTICES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Based on best practices, local and national laws, the CDC Guidelines for Preventing Child Abuse in Youth Serving Organizations, American Camp Association Guidelines, and in consultation with Foundation for Jewish Camp and their Yedid Nefesh Advisory Group of camp professionals and mental health experts, this resource explores nine key areas that help determine a camp's preparedness and ability to support the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health needs of the youth they serve. These areas are:

1. Camp Protection Policies and Procedures
2. Mental, Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Health Policies and Procedures
3. Nurturing Culture and Spiritual Life
4. Staff Mental, Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Wellbeing Guidelines on Healthy Boundaries
5. Guidelines on Healthy Boundaries
6. Screening and Selecting of Staff and Volunteers
7. Training and Learning
8. Ensuring Safe Environments
9. Communication and Transparency

Each area is explored in more detail below, along with key questions for camp staff and administrators to ask themselves and guidance on how to meet these best practice standards.

1. CAMP PROTECTION POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

A pivotal component to setting up a safe and supportive environment is ensuring that the organization has a comprehensive child abuse and mandated reporting policy and procedure, as well as policies and procedures to prevent and handle allegations of harassment and discrimination. This is the baseline for creating a safe environment where campers and staff know the boundaries of behaviors, the expectations of the environment, and when/how to make reports if necessary.

Every camp should have the following policies:

- Child Abuse Prevention and Reporting
- Anti-Harassment
- Anti-Discrimination

These policies should be regularly reviewed by leadership and/or outside experts to ensure compliance with local and national laws. Policies should include information on:

- Local mandated reporting laws
- Definitions of child abuse and neglect, including the types of abuse that are reportable to authorities under local law
- Definitions of harassment, discrimination, and any other necessary terms
- Camp policy for reporting suspicion of abuse or neglect, including:
 - How an allegation or suspicion may come to light
 - Who may be involved (such as a witness, confidant, or alleged offender)
 - What happens with the allegation
 - Where does it get reported internally and externally
- Camp policy for reporting harassment or discrimination
- Process of documentation
- Procedure for reporting any suspected abuse UP to the Camp Director or designee and OUT to the appropriate authorities
- Contact information to make a report both internally and externally
- Any institutional and legal protections for reporting abuse, neglect, harassment, or discrimination
- Any institutional and legal penalties for failure to report abuse, neglect, harassment, or discrimination

Training on these policies and procedures should take place with all staff on an annual basis.

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *Does your policy cover all types of abuse and neglect? What about harassment and discrimination?*
- *Have you provided clear definitions, so everyone is on the same page about what is meant, regardless of language or cultural differences?*
- *Have you addressed what it means to be a mandated reporter and reporting suspicion of abuse?*
- *What is your reporting chain? Who do staff go to with a concern, suspicion, or allegation? Where do you go if your concern is with the Camp Director?*
- *Do you provide staff with the phone numbers to report out to authorities?*
- *Are these policies and procedures easily accessible to campers, families, staff, donors, and community stakeholders?*

2. MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

The focus of this section is on camp and its campers—thinking about seasonal staff can be found in the section on Staff Mental, Emotional, Social, and Spiritual Wellbeing Guidelines on Healthy Boundaries.

When we think about MESSH policies and procedures, we are looking at a camp's preparedness to recognize and respond to youth with any challenges or issues. It is about creating an environment that is not only prepared for challenges, but also helps ensure that every youth in the environment is supported and thrives. This is about policies and procedures to handle challenges AND how camps can create and maintain a safe, welcoming environment for all campers.

Camps need policy to help guide responses and support youth with mental health challenges or diagnoses, including but not limited to social-emotional challenges, suicidal thoughts, self-harming behaviors, questions about identity, gender, and sexuality, struggles with eating or body image, bullying, social media, trauma, and other crises. This does not mean that one policy will cover every mental health challenge and scenario, but that there are some guidelines to help staff and administrators make decisions, take steps to support and help campers thrive, and know when they can no longer support a youth in this environment. Camps should, at least, have a general policy about MESSH challenges that covers the following steps:

- Ensures the safety of all campers
 - If needed, to contact additional staff for support and help
- Minimize the number of people involved and reduce any additional distractions;
- Attempt to de-escalate by communicating directly (e.g. clear statements, at eye level), calmly (e.g. low volume and calm tone of voice, patient listening), and without distractions (e.g. turn off a walkie talkie)
 - Don't rush a camper to calm down or try to limit or restrict their movements, as long as they are safe, give them space;
 - Work with them to normalize their [breathing](#) and try to understand what might help them in that moment (a walk, a quiet space to calm, a tactile object, etc.)
- Have eyes on the camper at all times
- Report UP for additional support as needed

****For any medical concern, medical treatment should be sought immediately.****

Camps need a staff member or team of staff who can respond to and support MESSH challenges. These staff should have experience handling mental health challenges and be a vital part of the reporting chain at camp. Camps should also consider creating opportunities for campers to engage with and build relationships with MESSH staff outside of moments of crisis or challenge and think about adding in resilience skill building to general camp activities.

Additionally, camps can create policies and procedures to help address MESSH challenges they deal with most frequently and help guide responses to challenges. Even if a camp chooses to have a general response policy for all MESSH challenges, they should create a policy and procedure for crisis response. Crisis response plans should include:

- Step-by-step action and response
- Staff members' specific roles and responsibilities
- Notification chain and timeline expectations
- Contact information for external support/advisors

It is not the intention for these policies to lock camps into a rigid structure, to create a situation that would lead to not accepting certain campers, or to not be flexible and able to adapt to individual needs. Instead, these policies are meant to provide the framework to respond to challenges in clear, confident, efficient, consistent, and caring ways. By having these policies written down, camps can help staff feel more supported confidently in possession of the tools to be able to respond to challenges. Writing policies down also helps to ensure consistent responses. Once the policy is written, camps should consider how they are going to distribute and educate on these policies to the various stakeholders including parents, campers, and staff.

Additionally, it is important that seasonal staff know the boundaries of their role in dealing with MESSH challenges and crises, as well as when and where to report up. Camps should have a clearly defined reporting chain that helps counselors know whom they should go to and when they should seek help. The policies should cover, and staff at all levels should be trained, never to keep a secret or to promise a camper that they will not tell someone else at camp or their parents/guardians.

When it comes to building and maintaining safe environments for campers, it is important that camp leadership consider how campers are being screened prior to arrival:

- What questions are camps asking?
- When is there follow up with families?
- Are there opportunities for follow up with other adults involved in the campers' lives? (Teachers, therapists, clergy, etc.)
- How and what information is being shared with various seasonal staff?

Each of these questions will help camp prepare for potential challenges and opportunities proactively. It will not solve or prevent problems, but it can help to mitigate some crises.

Key to creating and maintaining safe environments is thinking about a camp's programming. When building programs, has camp leadership and staff thought about [making programming inclusive and accessible](#) to all?⁶

⁶ If you are looking for resources to create an inclusive program, take a look at BBYO's Inclusive Programming Guide.

Another key component to building safe environments is how the camp is supporting gender non-binary campers. Do they have all-gender restrooms? Are there private spaces for campers to change? Do they have a policy to respect an individual rooming with the gender with which they identify? How do we communicate with families, especially if a child is not yet sharing information with parents? If your camp seeks to create this space, consider how you are addressing these key questions.

Finally, an essential piece of responding to MESSH challenges is having a system of documentation. Maintaining those documents is essential to protect campers, staff, and the organization. Proper documentation and record-keeping protect youth by laying the groundwork for possible realization of patterns of or signs and symptoms of abuse or mental health challenges; it also allows the agency to show (if necessary) that it followed all the appropriate steps as stipulated by local law and to justify the organization's actions with regards to staff members and program participants. At minimum, documentation should always include:

- Date of information received
- Names of staff involved, dates and formats of conversations, and up-to-date contact information
- Names of youth involved
- Names and contact information for parents/guardians
- Name of any outside agencies contacted, date of calls, contact information for follow up
- Summary of incident/allegation
- Summary of action taken, including any follow-up plans and timeline

It is also important to ensure that these records are kept safe and secure, and to monitor who is given access to information. Additionally, camp leadership must answer:

- Where are the incident reports going to live?
- Which staff are expected to complete them?
- How will those staff fill them out and submit them? Paper or digital?
- How are they being reviewed, how often, and by whom?
- Who needs access to these files? Is downloading access restricted?
- How long will a completed form be kept and where?
- How will they be able to see if something has happened with a youth prior to the incident at hand?
- How will staff be trained on completing these forms?

These concrete plans are vital to smooth implementation and accountability. Having a successful incident report is larger than just the form; it is having an entire system of documentation that ensures the success and safety of all campers and staff.

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *What do staff do with a MESSH concern? Where do they get support, and to whom do they report in various scenarios?*
- *Who is the person or people who are there to support concerns and help staff take next steps? How are these people and their roles introduced to the staff community?*
- *What information is collected before campers arrive at camp? How is it stored and accessed? Are there any proactive pieces put into place to support campers with identified needs?*
- *Are MESSH policies and procedures known to everyone or just a few? Is it written down and documented for institutional memory and accountability, or just something that is spoken about?*
 - *Can you create a pocket guide, key word(s) or phrase(s), or other quick/short ways for staff to reference and remember what to do?*
 - *Can you convey a few simple actions for staff to take like: listen, respond, refer?*
- *Is there a mental health professional on-site at all times? Is it clearly communicated across staff levels who is responsible for responding to and handling MESSH needs and challenges? Who do they serve, what are their qualifications, and how is their role defined and explained to campers and staff?*
- *How are staff, campers, and parents/families able to access mental health professionals and community care staff before, during, and after the summer?*
- *How, when, and from whom do you collect information and evaluate camper and staff MESSH support needs? Are static forms the only way to collect information, or are there other opportunities to connect and build relationships with campers, families, mental health providers, educators, or others as relevant?*
- *How do you keep track/document information to better support campers and staff (overall, daily, and from year to year)?*

3. NURTURING CULTURE AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

This section focuses on how the camp community consistently incorporates culture and spiritual life into everyday practices. It is about ways camp organizations can create spaces for processing, plan mindful scheduling, and incorporate resiliency skills into their programming.

This may look like⁷:

- Spaces to process
- Self-awareness activities
- Self-care time accounted for in schedule
- Practices to recognize and sanctify Shabbat
- Pajama breakfasts (for overnight camps)
- Spirit/dress-up days (for day camps)
- Communal gatherings
- Built-in moments woven through programming for reflection and processing
- Evening journaling
- Morning intention setting
- Facilitated cabin time

A central piece of nurturing culture is establishing routines and setting clear expectations and boundaries for campers and staff. When campers and staff know what to expect and what is expected of them, they feel more supported in the environment and can begin to engage in the experience differently.

Organizations do not need to do all of these things, but the goal is for camps to help campers and counselors to build life skills. It is about teaching campers and staff the ability to take space, reflect, learn a new skill, and grow. Then, when campers or staff find themselves in moments of stress, they can utilize the skills they have already learned.

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *Is camp programming proactively designed to help campers and staff build their toolkit to develop life skills and handle stressors/challenges?*
- *How does the physical space support the individual needs of current and potential campers and staff?*
- *Does the schedule allow for moments of reflection or skill-building in these areas?*
- *Do the spiritual teachings complement the skills you want campers and staff to build?*

⁷ Programmatic resources can be found in [FJC's Campopedia](#).

4. STAFF MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, AND SPIRITUAL WELLBEING

This section focuses on how the camp environment is prepared to respond to and support staff—both seasonal and year-round professionals. It is not just the campers who need MESSH support; counselors and year-round professionals are also in need of support and strategies to handle challenges. Staff support influences the overall tenor and culture of camp, and in turn, how staff is supported and nurtured influences how they care for campers.

Staff MESSH support begins the moment they are hired and is most glaringly obvious during staff training. Time allotted for staff training varies greatly between camps, and especially day and overnight camps. However, as leadership is planning staff training, they can maximize staff engagement and learning by considering mindful scheduling:

- Include opportunities for breaks.
- Present your content in various styles for different types of learners.
- Encourage moments of self-reflection throughout.
- Teach and role-model approachable strategies for wellbeing.
- Ensure that training is ongoing and not only available upfront.

Those transitioning from camper to counselor should receive education to support them on making this transition successfully.

Additionally, the camp environment itself needs to be set up to support the health and wellness of all staff. Staff roles, rules, and expectations need to be clear. Having clear policies and procedures immensely helps reduce staff stress and impacts positive health. It is strongly recommended that camps have a person whose responsibilities include focusing on staff development, wellness, and recreation. Beyond pre-camp training, this staff person should be expected to focus on plans throughout the summer.

How is the camp schedule created and adjusted throughout the summer as needed to accommodate staff health needs? If staff are feeling run-down and sick, how can time be built in for them to rest while still maintaining and running camp? Daily and other regular time off need to offer appropriate space and frameworks for self-care.

Finally, staff should be receiving regular feedback—positive and constructive—on their performance. These evaluations include staff feedback on the balance between work and self.

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *How does camp respond when a staff member needs support or is showing signs of struggling? Is this response system known to everyone or just a few? Is it written down and documented or just something that is spoken about?*
- *How are staff schedules built to ensure time to decompress and care for themselves?*
- *Are staff provided spaces for continuity of care conversations with therapists back home?*
- *What support is given to help international staff understand and feel a part of the camp community? How do we plan time off so that they can still connect with home?*
- *Is space created for staff feedback about unmet needs?*

Year-round staff need different support than seasonal employees. While it can be difficult for small agencies with limited budgets, it is recommended that boards, executives, and/or camp directors look at opportunities to provide additional benefits to year-round professionals like: mental health care, gym membership rate reduction or support, week-long closures to support rest post-camp, etc. These may be able to be achieved through partnerships with local organizations, insurance providers, or other non-traditional avenues.

5. GUIDELINES ON HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Healthy boundaries are about being able to set and clearly articulate limits—for oneself and for the camp community. When it comes to camps, healthy boundaries are framed by institutional expectations and values, rules and consequences for violations, proper supervision, education on working with youth safely, and knowledge of how to appropriately aid youth through challenges. When staff and campers are empowered to develop healthy boundaries, all camp community members increase self-esteem, improve relationships, and create space for individuals to grow and develop. In short, healthy boundaries are key to building safe communities and resilient youth.

Guidelines on healthy boundaries begin with limiting one-to-one interactions with youth whenever possible. All interactions between campers and staff should be conducted in open spaces. Every interaction with youth should be:

- Appropriate
- Observable
- Interruptable

Camp policy and procedure should clearly lay out that counselors are never permitted to be alone with a youth behind a closed door or in a space where no one else can see or intervene. Expectations of staff conduct and boundaries with campers should be clear and explicit. Counselors should know how they are expected to interact with campers, what their roles and responsibilities are, and the rules that govern those interactions.

Additionally, camp policy should clearly lay out for staff the expectations of their interactions with campers. It should be clearly noted that it is expected that camp staff will maintain a boundary in their relationships with campers and will act as role models, not a peer or best friend. Additionally, camp should establish boundaries on what is considered appropriate out-of-camp interaction on social media platforms. Given the pervasiveness of social media, simply saying, “there should be no online contact between campers and staff” is not enough and will set camp organizations and staff up for failure. Instead, camp leadership should help staff to set and maintain boundaries with campers all year round.

Camps should also have policies and procedures on what happens in the event of a boundary violation between campers or between campers and staff. This policy and procedure should include the process for reporting violations, what will happen when something is reported, camp leadership’s process for contacting/alerting parents, when a camp might report out to the authorities, and the process for taking disciplinary action. This should be reviewed with all campers and their families prior to camp and should be included when campers are signing their code of conduct. Campers and families should know how to report and there should be posters at camp reminding them of where to go for support.

Power dynamics should be a consideration in drafting healthy relationships policies and procedures. It is important to consider the following in drafting policy and procedure/response:

- **Co-create norms:** While camp staff establish the rules, how those look and show up in daily life can be impacted by campers. Provide context if there are rules that are essential for safety.
- **Set clear expectations:** Campers and staff should know from the start what is the expected behavior of them and of the organization. They should also know where they can go to for help if they feel rules have been violated or disrespected by other campers, staff, or anyone else on campus.
- **Communication:** Listen and ask open-ended questions. Try not to assume what is being said.
- **Resolve conflicts early:** Respond to issues and concerns as soon as they arrive and seek help quickly if needed. If a camper or counselor says that there is an issue, don't ignore it or think that it is immaterial.

It is recommended that camps have the following resources to create and maintain healthy boundaries:

- Community agreements
- Code of conduct for campers
- Code of conduct for staff
- Communication and social media guidelines
- Healthy relationships policy and procedures
- Process for looking into and managing allegations of boundary violations

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *How does camp communicate boundaries, rules, and expectations to staff, campers, and families?*
- *How are you thinking about creating and enforcing boundaries in a cabin, dormitories, hotel rooms, etc., so that you can provide quality supervision while still respecting space?*
- *What are the responses for boundary violations, and how is that reinforced?*
- *What are the positive values and boundaries camp wants campers and staff to learn as a part of the camp community?*

6. SCREENING AND SELECTING OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

An agency's screening and selection of employees and volunteers should be centered around ensuring that the staff working with youth are safe. It also hinges on how the agency communicates its vision on youth protection. All camps should be doing the following:

- Comprehensive interviews of prospective staff
- Reference checks of prospective staff
- Administering background checks for all staff
- Staff sign-off on all policies and procedures, code of conduct, and roles/expectations

Camp leadership should also be thinking about and communicating the organization's values to prospective employees, volunteers, and families. Clearly communicating camp values helps staff understand what behavior is inappropriate and will not be tolerated.

Visitors should never be left alone with campers, nor should they be allowed to have unsupervised contact with campers. Camp staff can consider providing visitors with a brief one-pager on camp values or boundaries with campers, or have the visitor sign off on appropriate conduct around campers. This can help provide an extra layer of protection and let any visitor know that staff are trained to address any issues.

For overnight camps, it is recommended that any overnight visitors or visitors who may have unsupervised access to campers be background checked prior to being allowed on campus. This helps to ensure that anyone who may have unsupervised access to campers is "safe" to be on campus and interact with campers. This includes camp spouses, visiting educators, or any other individuals who may be staying at camp overnight.

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *How is the organization communicating its safety practices to anyone who steps foot on campus or participates in camp programming?*
- *Who has access to minors, and what kind of screening or training should they have based on that access? How often does that screening, training, and subsequent access get reviewed and revised?*

7. TRAINING AND LEARNING

Training is an essential component of helping staff understand what the institution expects of them. It is how an institution brings its policies, values, and goals to life. Training lays the foundation for how staff understand the institution, the role they play, the rules, and the culture. It is a vital way to transmit information and help staff understand their role, and the roles of others, in the lives and development of their campers and within the broader community.

All staff should be trained annually on:

- Mandated reporting
- How to report child abuse, boundary violations, or inappropriate behavior
- Types of child abuse, definitions, and recognizing signs and symptoms
- Building and maintain healthy boundaries with youth
- Appropriate/inappropriate behavior with youth
- Recognizing and responding to mental health red flags (Youth Mental Health First Aid, ASIST, or other comparable training)

Additionally, camp staff should receive training on:

- Child development
- MESSH support for campers and staff, including out-of-bunk employees
- Supporting youth at camp
- Camp values
- Creating trauma informed environments
- Creating a self-care plan for camp staff

These trainings may not take place every summer, may only be offered to certain groups, or may be offered as continuing education sessions where staff receive a bonus for attending or deepening their learning.

Staff should receive training on the policies and procedures enumerated in the sections above. If camp leadership expect staff to follow camp policies and procedures, they must take the time to teach those and show how they work in practice. When possible, training should be interactive and experiential; this will increase staff engagement and learning.

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *What training is camp doing on an annual basis with all staff? Is training limited to the week before camp or does it extend through the summer/year?*
- *Does training help staff understand camp, their role, the expectations and boundaries, and the culture?*
- *How do you remind campers and staff what they have learned so they can continue to use it?*
 - *Can you create a pocket guide, key word(s) or phrase, or other quick/short way for staff to reference and remember what to do?*
- *How are counselors-in-training being educated on some of these topics?*
- *What training is offered to campers about the community they are a part of?*

8. ENSURING SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

Ensuring safe environments centers on the idea that the physical environment is a place that promotes mental, emotional, and social health and wellness. While this information cannot fully be gathered through policy, there are a few key steps organizations can take to ensure that their physical space promotes a healthy and safe environment for all youth. One key environmental consideration includes ensuring that all activities and programs are conducted in spaces that are open and visible. It is important to educate staff on how to conduct interactions with youth that are appropriate, observable, and interruptible. This should be a guiding principle that is explained and taught to staff.

A benefit of the camp environment is that being outside in open spaces can provide ample opportunities for good sight lines. When evaluating program spaces, personnel are required to consider the following:

- Space is open and visible
- Doors or buildings have windows/shutters
- Blinds remain open at all times (except during lockdown)
- Bathrooms or changing rooms provide privacy, while allowing for adult supervision

Any space that is not visible should not be used for one-on-one, youth-to-youth, or youth-to-staff interactions.

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *How are safe environments and power dynamics discussed with staff and campers?*
- *Are staff taught to design activities and build relationships with campers in a healthy and safe way?*
- *What supervision and feedback are offered to staff to ensure the environments they build are safe and the activities they are planning are meeting expectations, mission, and culture? Is the feedback ongoing with clear follow up? Is it positively framed?*
- *What is done when a staff member or camper violates another person's boundaries or does not abide by the rules of creating and maintaining safe environments?*

9. COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Communication and transparency are dependent on how the camp communicates its policies, procedures, and support to stakeholders—campers, staff, families, etc. Whether through online publication or in-person signs, how does the camp communicate what its values are, how it handles issues, the steps that it takes to create safe and welcoming environments, and what supports are available to youth and their families.

Camp organizations should share on their websites and at camps:

- Community values
- Protection policies and procedures
- Contact information available online and posted around camp to report abuse, mental health concerns, and inappropriate behavior
- Contact information for hotlines, crisis text lines, and other support information for campers at risk, staff in crisis, and community members in need year-round
- Contact information for Director of Community Care, Inclusion Director, Camp Mental Health Director, and/or Camp Director
- Information on camp inclusion and accessibility
- Resources for parents and caregivers to support campers leading up to camp and year-round

Key questions to keep in mind:

- *Does your community know your policies and procedures?*
- *Does the community know the values that guide your organization? Are they somehow visible on campus or linked back to your daily camp life?*
- *Is it easy for families to know how to reach out for help—as well as to whom they should reach out, and/or how camp can assist them in accessing help?*

III. FIRST STEPS

Looking at this guide, it can feel overwhelming to look at and begin to address MESSH in your camp. However, it is important to think about taking it one step and issue at a time.

The first thing all camps can and should look at is your response chain. Who is responsible for handling challenges, where do staff report, and what happens next. Think about the most common issues you face, and what support is needed to better respond to and manage that challenge. Make sure that you are following up any policy or procedure with training. Training is how your policies come to life; it builds and creates your culture, and informs how camp staff, campers, and families know who you are and what you stand for.

Some general advice as you move forward on this journey:

- **Don't box yourself in:** Give yourself space to grow and evolve over time. Don't think that you have to have all the answers today.
- **Recognize that best practices change:** You will need to revisit policies, and just because you wrote it three years ago doesn't mean that you shouldn't revisit or re-evaluate today.
- **Get outside help:** Just like your staff, YOU do not have to do this alone. Reach out to experts locally and nationally who can help.

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The BBYO Center for Adolescent Wellness (BBYO-CAW) seeks to identify and provide best practices in adolescent health and wellness so that Youth Serving Organizations can be places where adolescents thrive. From wellness assessments, to policy creation, to consultation, and training, all of our services are designed to build up the institution and individuals to best support the youth in their care.

jewishcamp.org centerforadolescentwellness.org