

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?*