**De-Escalating Camper Behavior**

When a camper is rude, defiant, extremely emotional or questions your authority, it would be natural to take it personally or to act defensively. Having a camper get “under your skin” is a common “hazard” of working closely with them. Children carry with them all the unfinished tasks of growing up, including things like respecting authority, compromising, delaying gratification, letting go of things they have no control over, tolerating frustration and managing their feelings and impulses (self-regulating). Remember, **you are the adult.** Even when campers are testing your limits, down deep they are counting on you to be more mature and responsible than *they* are able to be at that moment! If you react to provocative camper behavior with provocative or impulsive behavior of your own, you are simply escalating things and therefore failing to teach your campers anything about self-control. Your posture needs to be mature, restrained and reasonable: **firm and calm—tough *and* tender!** You are the one who sets the standard and the example. You might be surprised learn that campers are depending on you to *show them how!*

The success of camp is *all* about your personal commitment to give of yourself, to bring the program to life, to inspire and encourage your campers, to temper their impulses and teach them respect, patience and empathy by *being* respectful, patient and empathic (not by forcing them). Qualities like respect, patience, fairness, generosity, restraint and empathy *are learned only through experience.* We all learn these qualities by being with people who practice them. You as a counselor can only teach these qualities by *living them!* Studies tell us over and over again that the single greatest factor assuring that young people will grow up to be self-respecting, productive adults, capable of loving and caring for others, is *the presence of a caring adult in their life.* That awesome responsibility is yours!

**Remember: An acting up child is often in distress.**

Children don’t always use their words to tell us where it hurts. They often tell us with their behavior. Even a child who challenges your authority is telling you where others have failed them. “Acting up” behavior is evidence of a child who needs patience, guidance and healing. A child in pain is just not elegant about the way they let us know!

**Remain Calm**

Mirroring is a powerful, innate (“hard-wired”) force in human beings. Rather than match the emotional tone of an upset or acting out camper, *you* set the tone! You can speak firmly and loudly if needed *and still have your voice be calm.* **Patience is a strength!**

**Drop the Rope!**

Getting into a power struggle escalates most situations (just with children!) Pick your battles and drop the rope!

**Put Your Judgment Away**

Kids in distress are extremely sensitive to non-verbal expressions of judgment, impatience, shame, anger or ridicule. Shame destroys trust and further injures an already struggling child. It says to a kid, “You are a bad person!” Nothing will escalate a situation faster than the hint in your voice or the look on your face that communicates blame, shame, judgment or disapproval. Here’s what to check in yourself:

🞏 tone of voice 🞏 facial expression 🞏 the look in your eyes 🞏 body language

**Avoid Asking a Lot of Questions**

When kids are highly emotional their “reasonable brain” is offline. Asking a lot of questions will shut them down. Doing so is overwhelming to them. It will make them escalate their crying, shouting or other displays of distress. Keep your questions to a minimum. Only after you have helped cool things off, can you “talk it out!” (See below).

**Be Reassuring: Focus on Strength, Ability, Optimism**

Words of reassurance or optimism (“You’re doing fine!” “I’ll help you!” “You’re going to be ok!”) can help soothe. Pointing out a kid’s strengths or abilities or even their ability to cope (“you’ve got this!” “you’re doing really well!”) will shorten the recovery time. That said, if talking it upsets the child, then stop talking and remain quiet!

**Break it Up—Cool it Off—Talk it Out!**

The first priority in any situation with a camper or campers is to **restore safety.** Remove the child from an “audience,” or remove the audience from the child. If two kids are fighting, break it up by standing between them; or, **break the eye-contact** between them. **Get additional adult help** if you need to. **Cool things off** before you try making sense of what happened. (**Know when to stop talking** and remain quiet and calm!) Asking a lot of questions when kids are full of adrenalin will escalate things. After the camper (s) have been calm for 10-minutes, then see if they can talk. Don’t force it.