

Addressing Camper Behavior:

What Do I See, What Do I Hear, What Do I Do?

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“I tried everything, and Jae just keeps acting out. What do I do? I’m ready to put that kid in timeout forever!” cried a desperate staff member. If you’re a returning staff member, this may be something you’ve heard or exclaimed yourself. If you’re new to working at camp, be aware that this type of situation is a common experience.

Many camps include ways to guide and support camper behaviors in the staff handbook; it’s also a topic addressed in staff training. We know, however, that reading or hearing about dealing with undesirable camper behaviors is often not enough. We can have a cognitive understanding of how to handle such situations, but in the moment, it can be a challenge to figure out how to put what was learned into action.

This is because addressing campers’ challenging behaviors is an emotional situation. Campers are emotional — they may cry, yell, hit, scream — all signs of some type of distress. Staff are also emotional; common responses might include feelings of uncertainty, fear, anger, anxiety, or shame.

The good news is — by learning about children as a whole and campers as individuals, recognizing and understanding personal emotions, and practicing behavior management techniques — you and your fellow staff can indeed become skilled at helping campers work through behavioral challenges.

Reasons and Responses

Understanding why misbehaviors occur can help minimize the likelihood that something undesirable will happen. People commonly act out because they are missing one or more basic human needs — they’re hungry, thirsty, tired, ill, or injured. Any type of physical discomfort can result in someone acting out, especially if they don’t recognize or know how to communicate their need.

Unmet emotional and social needs can also result in undesirable behaviors. If someone feels sad, scared, nervous, or bored (emotional needs), or they feel unloved, excluded, lonely, or embarrassed (social needs), they might act out in ways that negatively affect them and the group. Similar situations, like feeling overstimulated or unsafe, can also result in undesirable actions.

As staff, we can help lessen the likelihood of unwanted behaviors by preparing ahead of time. Ensuring that campers eat and drink well (and enough) can help eliminate a response to unmet physical needs. At overnight camps, we also have the responsibility to help campers get good sleep.

To support campers' emotional needs, staff can help them talk through feelings (e.g., sadness), recognize their strengths and overcome their fears, and have meaningful conversations with adults, which helps develop important emotional connections. We can preemptively address social needs by selecting activities that help campers develop strong relationships, personally connecting with campers as individuals, and using supportive language.

By organizing activity spaces, supplies, and equipment, and addressing weather issues (e.g., heat, rain) we can reduce camper anxiety. Further, being consistent in words and actions, letting campers know about schedule changes in advance, and minimizing external stimulants (e.g., by managing the environment, providing sound-canceling headphones) factor into reducing anxiety and nervousness.

Knowing Your Group and the Individuals

Overall, understanding campers as a group (age, skill levels) and as individuals (how they best learn, what they like/dislike, what cultural influences might affect the way they behave) goes a long way to managing undesirable behaviors before they occur. Some people learn best by listening, others by seeing, and others by doing; many learn best by combining the approaches. Thus, providing instructions in a variety of ways can help campers be successful and manage their own behaviors.

Rules, structure, and routine also help people to self-manage behaviors. All rules should have reasons, and those reasons should be shared with campers. Stating rules in positive language ("please walk; the dock might be slippery" rather than "don't run") lets others know what you want them to do and why. Only telling campers what they cannot do can be confusing and demoralizing. In addition, the simple act of alerting campers that a change is about to happen can be helpful. For instance, "In three minutes we're going to move from here to there" is much easier to handle than, "Let's go, we're moving." Providing a verbal transition helps people process what is about to happen.

Giving more instructions to start, rather than stop, asking rather than telling, and providing options are also great strategies to minimize misbehaviors. Examples include: "Please hold the ball" rather than "Stop bouncing the ball"; "What are some kind ways to include people?" as opposed to, "The best way to include people is to do XX"; and "How do you want to walk to the activity today — as Martians or pirates?"

Everyone Misbehaves

Humans are responsive to their environment; those responses are based on personal experiences (family, school, neighborhood) as well as age, gender, disability status, and cultural influences. This is true for all. How staff act and respond to camper actions is driven by the same types of personal experiences.

For example, younger children have challenges managing their own behaviors; developmentally, they don't yet have the needed cognitive or emotional skills. Adults understand this and tend to be more tolerant of undesirable behaviors from younger children than from older youth. In addition, researchers found that adults tend to tolerate less misbehavior by girls; however, boys are punished more frequently than girls for their behaviors (Brannon & Clark, 2024).

Brannon and Clark (2024) also found that children who are members of minority racial and/or ethnic groups are called out more often and face harsher punishments than children who are white. The group most frequently identified as misbehaving are Black boys.

Further, children with disabilities are often perceived as acting out more than those who are not disabled; they also face more negative consequences for the same behaviors as others. Children who are neurodiverse are called out more for the same undesirable behaviors expressed by those who are neurotypical.

Cultures have unique approaches to behavior. For instance, one culture might communicate more loudly than another (are boisterous, shout when laughing) while others communicate more softly. If a camper is from a "loud" culture and the staff are members of a "quiet" culture, the loud camper might be perceived as misbehaving when there is no such intention. The issue is a cultural communication difference, not a demonstration of acting out.

Your Response Makes a Difference

Self-awareness and understanding provide a strong foundation for successful behavior management. Knowing your trigger points is a beginning. For instance, imagine growing up in a house where your dad pointed his finger right in your face when he was angry, and it scared you. Now, anytime someone points at you, you react with fear and anger. If you're aware of this and can recognize it as it happens, you can choose to breathe, count to 10, and then respond to the undesirable behavior — not out of childhood fears but with effective techniques.

We tend to respond to undesirable behaviors in one of two ways: punishment (e.g., timeout, withholding something desirable) and positivity (using praise, positive feedback). Punishment might stop a behavior in the moment, but it rarely addresses the underlying reason the behavior occurred. Over time, punishment can erode trust, damage relationships, and increase the likelihood that similar behaviors will recur.

Positive responses are much more effective at helping campers manage their behaviors. Such responses begin with gathering information. When misbehavior occurs, pause — even if it's only for a few seconds — and ask yourself: "What do I see? What do I hear?" These questions help shift from reacting emotionally (and perhaps, irrationally) to understanding what a camper might be trying to communicate.

What Happened Before? During? After?

Start by thinking about what happened before the behavior; be curious. What might have triggered the misbehavior? Are basic needs not being met (camper is hungry, tired, overstimulated, or uncomfortable)? Are they missing a necessary skill or reacting to a personal stressor or trigger? Behaviors are a form of communication, and if campers don't have the words or skills to express what they need, they may show you in unwanted ways.

Next, focus on what is happening during the behavior. Notice whether it is individual or influenced by the group.

You might see: Campers excluding themselves or others, Refusing instructions, Taking others' belongings, Running away, Showing signs of sadness, fear, or shame

You might hear: Crying, Shouting, Name-calling, Whispering, Interrupting, Talking over others

At the group level, behavior can spread quickly — what starts with one camper affects everyone.

Then consider what happened after the behavior. Ask yourself how adults and peers responded and what the camper gained from the situation. Did the camper get what they wanted — attention, activity avoidance, or control? Whether intentional or not, these outcomes often influence whether a behavior is likely to recur.

Having this information can help you decide what to do next. Effective responses are intentional, consistent, and focused on helping campers experience success — they go beyond simply stopping a behavior.

Deciding What to Do

Addressing undesirable behaviors with subtle strategies such as making eye contact, moving closer, using hand gestures, or redirecting the activity can be quite effective. Quiet reminders of expectations or structured opportunities to release energy ("Let's run around the field screaming as loud as we can") can help campers regulate without drawing unnecessary attention to any one individual.

When subtle strategies aren't effective, be more direct while keeping relationships at the center. Use behavior-specific, genuine praise to help campers understand what they are doing well and how to repeat it. When correction is needed, first tend to anyone who might have been harmed (feelings were hurt, they were excluded); then clearly guide the camper toward what they should be doing. Whenever possible, handle corrective conversations privately. Many camps use a system of positive reinforcers such as awarding beads or tokens for campers who model desired behaviors.

If what you have already tried hasn't resulted in desired behaviors, try creating a written behavior success plan with a camper. This is a document you create together that specifies: Desired

behaviors, Expectations for behavior, Ways a camper can get support, Clear consequences if elements of the contract are not met

The clarity a behavior plan provides often helps campers self-manage their behaviors.

Strong, caring relationships with both individual campers and the group create trust, which is a foundation of behavior. Ask campers what they need, offer real choices, and involve them — when appropriate — in creating simple behavior success plans. Mindfulness moments, journaling, and genuine recognition (such as handwritten notes or small acknowledgments) can reinforce positive behaviors.

Know When and How to Ask for Help

Sometimes, even with great observation, the use of subtle strategies and direct responses, a behavior challenge persists. This may result in moments when you need support. Calling in a supervisor or co-counselor is not a failure — it is a responsible step that helps ensure campers receive the care and guidance they need. It also provides emotional support and can serve as a learning moment for all staff.

Before meeting with your supervisor or co-counselor, gather notes from what you saw, what you heard, and how the camper responded to different management strategies you tried. Then consider using a simple, focused problem-solving framework like Martell’s 1-3-1 strategy (2023) alongside a behavior success plan.

Name 1 Behavior You Would Like to Address:

Name one specific behavior you’re concerned about — something clear and observable. For example, “Camper interrupts group discussions several times per activity.”

Name 3 Strategies You Tried:

List three strategies you’ve already used to support the camper. These should be things you actually did, not what you intend to do. For example:

- I provided quiet verbal reminders of expectations.
- I taught hand-signal cues for taking turns.
- I shifted the camper into a helper role.

Name 1 New Idea You’ll Try Next:

Choose one next action you haven’t tried yet — something targeted and manageable. This becomes part of the behavior success plan you cocreate with the camper and share with your supervisor (Martell, 2023). For example: Use a visual timer to help with turn taking, and when the camper waits for their turn, award them one point (that they can cash in at the canteen).

Once you've completed the 1-3-1 process, take the plan to your supervisor and together build a behavior management plan that can help the camper be successful. It might look like this:

- **Behavior goal** — Name specific camper behaviors you want them to change.
- **Teaching strategies** — List three supports you can provide the camper to help them learn replacement behaviors.
- **Positive supports** — Identify the types of praise, privileges, or recognitions you can use to reinforce camper success.
- **Check-ins** — Write down when and how you'll track camper progress.
- **Adjustments** — Describe things you can change if progress stalls.

A behavior success plan gives you a roadmap so that both you and the camper know exactly what success looks like and how progress will be recognized.

Follow-up Matters

After applying the success plan, take time to follow up with your supervisor and camper. Share wins, no matter how small. Did the camper wait quietly for two out of three transitions today? That's progress worth celebrating and documenting. If something isn't working as intended, ask your supervisor to help you tweak the plan. Maybe the strategy needs more practice, the goal needs adjusting, or the supports need to be strengthened.

Follow-up does three important things. It:

1. Reinforces that behavior support is a team effort
2. Helps you refine plans based on real experience
3. Builds your confidence as a reflective, capable staff member

Managing behavior is not about being perfect or having all the answers. It is about noticing, listening, and responding with intention. When you take the time to understand what you see and hear, you're better equipped to take action that builds confidence, reduces escalation, and supports a positive experience for all.

Discussion Starters:

1. Name a camper behavior you anticipate might be challenging for you. Identify what you might see or hear early on and what those signals could tell you about a camper's unmet needs or missing skills.
2. Reflect on the subtle and direct behavior strategies you want to be more intentional about using this summer. Share how planning ahead with the 1-3-1 approach could help you respond more confidently when challenges arise.
3. Consider how regular check-ins with your supervisor can support you. Describe how sharing successes and tweaking behavior success plans can help you grow and feel more supported in your role.

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