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Understanding the Roles of Recreation Leaders in Community-Wide Bullying Prevention Efforts

Recreation Leaders' Unique Role in Addressing Bullying

How can community recreation leaders help to prevent bullying?

Bullying affects a large number of students and may have a serious impact on those who are involved. Although children are more likely to experience bullying at school than in recreational settings (Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003), bullying can occur anywhere children gather in person or online. Community-based efforts are important to supplement school-wide bullying prevention activities (Holt, Raczynski, Frey, Hymel, & Limber, 2013).

Coaches, instructors, recreation staff, and volunteers who work in camps, afterschool, and other community-based recreational and extracurricular programs have a history of building supportive relationships that result in positive interactions for children, particularly at-risk youth (Bocarro & Witt, 2003; Sprouse & Klitzing, 2005). They bring a valuable perspective and set of skills to the task of changing social norms to improve a child's quality of life. When bullying occurs, proper training and support will ensure recreation staff and volunteers know how to respond to and prevent further incidents. Some best practices for immediate response include:

- **Respond consistently and appropriately**, stepping in to stop bullying immediately wherever it occurs.

- **Investigate thoroughly** when bullying is suspected or reported.

- **Follow up with children and their parents**, as appropriate, to ensure that the bullying stops.

- **Adopt evidence-based practices**, when possible, to effectively prevent bullying, protect children who are victimized, and help those who bully to deal with their counterproductive behaviors. Ensure that these practices are a good fit with the strengths and needs of your particular population.

Bullying can be prevented in recreation programs and centers when staff and volunteers:

- **Commit to making programs safe for children, free from physical and emotional harm.** Close supervision by adults in common meeting areas, locker rooms, pool areas, and athletic fields is essential. Adults can also model inclusive behavior that can also have the effect of encouraging children and youth to relate to one another in the spirit of inclusivity, respect and caring.

- **Assess bullying.** To understand the extent to which children experience and witness bullying in recreational settings, try conducting a short survey, interview, or focus group, which can also help raise awareness and motivate adults to take action.

- **Establish and enforce clear rules that address bullying.** Describe the behaviors expected of children, and continuously reinforce that bullying will not be permitted. These rules and policies should be shared with children and their parents along with clear guidance about appropriate behavior. Harsh, inflexible discipline strategies, such as zero tolerance policies, should be avoided. Such policies have been found to harm student-adult relationships (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Instead, graduated sanctions should be used for rule violations, which are appropriate for the developmental level of the child and the nature and severity of the bullying.

- **Spend time talking with children and youth about bullying.** Talking with children about bullying in ways that are age-appropriate helps them understand what it is, why it is harmful, and how to respond.

Challenges & Opportunities for Recreation Leaders
Recreation leaders may experience the following challenges in addressing bullying:

- **Because of a natural ebb and flow of children attending recreation programs, staff may find it difficult to spend consistent and quality time with each child.** Even when participation levels are stable, staff may be expected to supervise too large of a group to become familiar with their personalities, patterns of behavior, and friendships. This limits the staff's ability to detect bullying and form the supportive relationships needed for children to confide in adults about bullying.

- **Prioritizing training on bullying prevention for staff and volunteers can be difficult in light of budget, time, or programmatic constraints.** Particularly if there is a high staff turn-over and/or very limited hours available for staff development.

- **The risk of bullying may be higher due to the nature of the recreation programs or the youth participating.** Programs involving large groups of children and youth with wide age ranges can be difficult to supervise, particularly when activities are not highly structured. Children and youth usually bully peers who are their same age or younger. Because the risks of bullying may be higher in such settings, it is important to have clear policies and adequate numbers of supervising adults who are trained and supported in effective methods of bullying detection and intervention.

There are also many important opportunities for recreation leaders to address bullying:

- **Less structured and positive activities may help children interact in constructive ways with their peers.** Well-supervised recreational settings give children and youth a chance to engage in activities that promote new friendships – a positive socializing effect that is important to every child's social-emotional development (Bocarro, Greenwood, & Henderson, 2008). These friendships can be helpful for those who are bullied and for children who tend to be socially isolated.

- **Recreation and leisure activities develop strong relationships between children and adults.** Program staff, coaches, and mentors spend time with children on a weekly or monthly basis in relationships that may continue for years. Because youth often view them as trusted and supportive adults, they may disclose concerns about bullying or other problems that they experience or witness. These trusted adults may also be able to work positively with aggressive youth to curb bullying and other problematic behaviors.

- **Staff can create opportunities for children and youth to advocate for and take the lead in community efforts.** Involving youth in meaningful conversations and prevention efforts will help develop critical life skills (Eccles & Appleton-Gootman, 2002). Understanding the value of public service at a young age prepares them to become civic leaders and nurtures a sense of pride in their community.

How Recreation Leaders Can Engage and Include Others in Community Bullying Prevention Strategies

While the involvement of recreation leaders and staff varies, they make up a sizeable group of community members, civic leaders, mentors, and parents involved in realizing a vision of community-wide bullying prevention. Combining the resources and partners of recreation programs, along with the skills of its leaders, can bring awareness to the problem of bullying and momentum to the task of exploring community solutions. Recreation leaders can:

- **Apply effective community change methods to raise awareness about bullying and support for bullying prevention.** Community forums are often convened when recreation agencies strive to revitalize distressed neighborhoods and increase the participation of

at-risk youth (Beard, 2013). Applying these same methods could help raise awareness about bullying and introduce proven strategies of bullying prevention.

- **Gain the support of schools and community partners for a community-wide campaign.** The reach and connections of community recreation programs can bring many needed partners to the task of community collaboration that is essential in spreading the message of how to prevent bullying and protect children and youth (Holt et al., in press).

Ideas for Next Steps

- Learn more about bullying prevention through StopBullying.gov and the resources listed below. Review the research presented in the modules and how it is best communicated to your peers and other motivated audiences.

- Review any existing data within your school or community regarding bullying. Consult the Community Action Toolkit which provides helpful tools for performing a landscape assessment that will help you identify relevant data, as well as the broader needs and opportunities within the community.

- Plan a bullying prevention event that will inform and train a broader network of staff, volunteers, youth, or other members of the community to help dispel common myths and misdirections. This will also shed light on the importance of a holistic, community-based effort.

Resources and References

Sample of Resources Available

American Camp Association (ACA) – This membership organization provides helpful resources for camp staff and those who work with children and youth to get involved in bullying prevention efforts. It includes key resources for developing constructive policies, training staff, and communicating with parents and youth. For more information, visit www.acacamps.org.

National Parks and Recreation Association – The more than 30,000 park and recreation professionals and partners who are members of NPRA advocate for public spaces, parks, recreation and conservation. NPRA's online journal shares stories of local success, trends and the knowledge gained from community work in conservation, health and wellness and social equity. For more information, visit www.nrpa.org.

National Recreation Foundation – This charitable organization advances physical activities and healthy lifestyles, and competitively funds projects that serve at-risk youth to provide opportunities for improved health, social skills development and civic leadership. For more information, visit www.nationalrecreationfoundation.org.

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