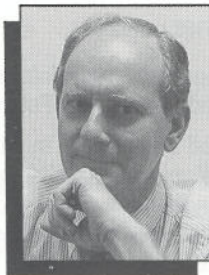


In the Trenches

by Bob Ditter



When Campers Disclose Sexual or Physical Abuse

Dear Bob:

At our camp for girls this last summer we experienced a problem we have never had to deal with before. One of our campers told a friend — another camper — that she had been sexually abused by a friend of the family. This information was not only upsetting to the girls in the cabin, but greatly upset the staff members who became aware of it. In addition, we were not sure what to do with this information. Obviously, we were concerned about this child's welfare, but it was not clear to us what to say to her, what to say to her parents, or even what our legal responsibilities were. Can you shed some light on this difficult topic?

Distraught in Pennsylvania

Dear Distraught:

The incident you describe — a camper revealing that he or she is being or has

been sexually or physically abused — is referred to as disclosure. From an informal survey of camps across the United States, disclosure at camp seems to have been on the rise in 1993.

This phenomenon is not surprising, when one considers that children do not make a disclosure unless they feel safe in their environment. Given that most camps work very hard to create such an atmosphere, it is not uncommon for children to use the opportunity to make known their emotionally devastating secret.

Girls tend to make disclosure at camp up to ten times more frequently than boys. One reason for this is that girls are more typically sexually abused inside the family — by an uncle, cousin, step father, mother's boyfriend or brother — than are boys. (Boys are sexually abused outside the family 11 times more frequently than girls. This fact puts a boy more "at risk" in a place like camp, for example, than it does a girl.)

Since the "scene of the crime" for most girls is within their families, being at camp means a temporary respite from the abuse. As a girl begins to feel increasingly safe at camp (or as she comes closer and closer to going back to the source of the abuse), she may take a chance and

make her disclosure. For boys, who have most likely been victimized outside of the family, camp may not be perceived as being as safe a place to "take a stand" as it is for girls, because boys may associate camp with another time when they were made to "feel funny." This may have nothing to do with camp itself; it is simply the association a boy may make to feeling unsafe outside his family.

The way most girls reveal their *secret* is much the way you have described in your letter. First, a camper swears a friend to secrecy and discloses the information to her. That camper, upset by the news, goes to a trusted counselor and, after demanding that she promise never to tell anyone, passes along the secret.

That counselor is now in a terrible double bind. Does she go to the director and get help, thereby losing the trust of her confidante? Or does she remain loyal to the camper, only to live with the knowledge that a young girl is allegedly at risk with no chance of rescue?

GIANT

4-Man Inflatable Boat
With OUTBOARD MOTOR

\$167

CALL FREE 7 DAYS A WEEK

As part of an advertising test, United Pacific Freight will send the above boat and motor to anyone who reads and responds to this test within the next 30 days. All boats are brand new, packed in original shipping cartons. Constructed of double thick, hi-density fabric, (Lot-Z 26), resistant to abrasion, sunlight, salt & oil. Four separate air chambers for extra safety, with self locking safety valves, oar locks bow lifting & towing handle and is approximately 9 1/2' long. All boats are recommended for ocean and fresh water. Limited quantity. First come, first served - LIMIT - 3 boats per address (no exceptions). If your order is received within the next 10 days, you will receive FREE, a hand/foot inflator/deflator. Add \$9 handling and crating for each boat requested: United Pacific Freight pays all shipping. All boats are accompanied with a LIFETIME GUARANTEE that they must perform 100% or you may return your boat for a complete refund. Send appropriate sum to: Dept. #152 United Pacific Freight, 16135 Leadwell St., Van Nuys, CA. 91406. For fastest service order by Visa or Master Card.

CALL FREE

1-800-637-6013

DEPT. #152

HAVE YOUR CREDIT CARD READY VISA / MC



- Fashion Dolls
- Dinosaurs
- Trolls
- Teddy Bears
- Stuffed animals
- Full-color, custom shirt printing
- Normal Production time: just 5 days!
- For a FREE color catalog, or the name of the Sales Rep in your area, just call:

Shirts Illustrated
800-532-8899
fax: 805-965-9840

Role Models

Circle 65 on Reader Inquiry Card

Counselors need support around this issue. During orientation they need to know that disclosure by campers is a real possibility. They should be instructed to tell the child, whether the actual victim or the "informant-friend," the following:

1. I am glad you told me.
2. Having a secret like this all alone must be terrible.
3. I believe you (even if you do not know whether what the girl is saying is true).
4. What kind of a friend would I be (would we be) if we did not get you (your friend) the help you (she) need(s)?
5. I think the reason you told me (she told you) in the first place is you want (she wants) some help.
6. You have (your friend has) a right to be safe and get help.
7. There is a difference between *confidence* and *keeping secrets*. Keeping secrets can *hurt* people; confidence keeps people's feelings from *being hurt*.
8. There are people whose job it is to help children exactly like you (exactly like your friend).

Some other pointers:

- Counselors must agree to go directly to camp administrators, not to tell other staff. Children have a right to their privacy. They worry about who knows.
- Don't expect staff to remember. You will have to coach them through it.
- Find out who else knows. "Damage control" is crucial to the well-being of the child and the other campers and staff. You need to ask your staff to rise above gossip.
- Staff will need their own emotional support. As you enlarge the "envelope of confidentiality," you might include trusted staff, other professionals and resources. Remember, there may be someone on your staff who has had an experience similar to the child making the disclosure. That staff person may need extra support.

Bob Ditter is a licensed clinical social worker specializing in child and adolescent treatment. Camp directors are invited to write to Bob at: Bob Ditter, "In the Trenches," 93 Union St., Ste. 307, Newton, MA 02159. Letters should be signed, although requests for confidentiality will be honored. "In the Trenches" is sponsored by American Income Life Insurance.

- Your legal responsibility is bound by state law. All states now have a fairly uniform "mandated reporting law." This states that anyone in a care-taking role with children (e.g., counselors) are mandated to report suspected abuse. It is not your job, nor the job of your staff, to verify the allegation or disclosure. Find out what the law is in your state.
- Reports are actually made in the state in which the abuse allegedly took/is taking place. If your camper is from out of state, get your state reporting agency to help you make the proper contacts.
- Be sure to acquaint yourself with a representative of your reporting

agency before you actually need them! Many directors invite an agency representative into camp during orientation to talk with staff about child abuse and reporting laws. Having a preexisting relationship with an agency comes in handy if you need them during a crisis.

- Consider using the ACA Hotline. While they do not dispense legal or medical advice, they can help you sort through the questions and explore options and resources. It has helped many directors in times of need. From June through August, call 317/342-8456 (8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. EST), or 317/831-8190 (evenings and weekends). □

Leading the Field

1994 DAY CAMP CONFERENCE

October 13-15, 1994

Ramada O'Hare ▼ Chicago, Illinois

American Camping Association

Seven reasons why you can't afford to miss this conference

1. State-of-the-art strategies to competitively position your camp
2. New ideas to pump creativity into your programming and operations
3. Proven "how-to's" for staff training
 - ▼ Recruiting
 - ▼ Orientation
 - ▼ Mid-season blahs
 - ▼ Exit interviews
4. In-depth information on dealing and coping with today's kids
5. Hot topics like:
 - ▼ Risk management
 - ▼ Legislation
 - ▼ Year-round education
 - ▼ ADA-Update
6. Cost - \$175 ACA member ▼ \$275 non-member ▼ Special discounts
7. Networking with top day camp professionals from across America

**DAY
CAMP
WORKS!**



Charting new frontiers in Camping

- Program Evaluation
- Camp Planning
- Site Development
- Facilities Design
- Environmental Conservation

Schmidt Copeland Parker Stevens

1220 West Sixth Street Suite 300 The Bradley Building Cleveland Ohio 44113 (216) 696-6767

Circle 18 on Reader Inquiry Card