

Common Causes of Camper Conflicts

Common Causes of Camper Conflicts		Preventive Strategies
Campers are tired, hot, or hungry	Being overly tired or otherwise physically uncomfortable can create an emotional state where campers are more susceptible to conflict and other challenging behavior. Tired children are less able to control their emotions or keep things in perspective.	Be intentional in taking regular breaks for drinking water, snacks, and cooling off. Move campers to shade or climate-controlled areas as available. Pay attention to energy levels and change activities as needed. For resident camps, make sure campers are getting enough sleep. Request extra rest periods or sleep-in times as needed.
Rules are unclear, too complicated, or there are too many	Too many rules or rules that are too harsh or negative, and game/activity rules that are too complicated can create confusion and frustration, leading to conflicts.	Make sure rules are easy to understand as well as age-appropriate. Don't assume campers understand the rules, or how to do a specific task. Take the time to explain, demonstrate, and teach. Remind campers about activity/game rules at the start each time, and stop play to clarify as needed. Give short, easy-to-understand directions; give one direction at a time. Use language that campers understand. Make sure games/activities aren't too complicated for the age/physical/mental/emotional stage of campers. As applicable, modify game rules to make it easier to understand/play. Allow campers to help establish rules for their cabin/group/team.
Camper feels they are being left out	A child who feels left out or who is not developing relationships is often more inclined to resort to being noticed by any means necessary, including creating conflicts with others.	Connect campers with each other early and often. Get campers interacting from the moment they arrive at camp. Continuously make sure each camper is being included with friends, in the living group, and in activities. Be aware of how campers are treating each other, and stay emotionally in tune. Spend time each day giving full attention to each of your campers. Help children learn how to make friends. Use team-building activities and debriefing to help campers bond and learn relationship-building skills.
Competition	Unless competition is well managed, a common downside is that one child (or group) can succeed only if all of the others fail, often resulting in the measure of a child's worth in proportion to the number of others they have beaten. In turn, this teaches children to regard others as obstacles to their success, making them less able to take the perspective of others, to have empathy for others, and less able to resolve conflicts. Additionally, traditional competition often encourages behaviors that undermine personal acceptance and relationship-building skills, and may create feelings of failure, fear, shame, isolation, and self-doubt, increasing the potential for frustration, flared tempers, and conflict between campers. Further, for campers who don't learn well, or who emotionally shut down in a competitive setting, emotions such as tension, timidity, and anxiety are realities which, again, may create an environment that encourages conflict. Younger campers may simply not be emotionally mature enough to handle competition in a positive way, and pushing them (real or perceived pressure from staff or peers) can create a stressful or unsafe environment.	Before including competition, be sure to consider the developmental age, emotional maturity, and skills readiness of campers, as competition may push them to try to perform beyond their level of emotional comfort or safe level of skill, or may discourage, frustrate, or cause them to shut down emotionally and/or to stop participating. When campers aren't yet proficient or emotionally mature enough to handle competition, consider conducting activities in a manner that allows campers to have success without struggling against each other, such as encouraging them to "compete" with themselves to improve their skills and judge their performance on their own progress, rather than by comparing their skills to others. Give campers specific feedback on their performance, focusing on their individual goals and areas of needed improvement, without reference to the performance of others.

Common Causes of Camper Conflicts — <i>continued</i>		Preventive Strategies — <i>continued</i>
Developmental age	Children are naturally loud, messy, curious, willful, impatient, demanding, forgetful, fearful, self-centered, and full of energy. All kids/teens are in different places socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Some conflicts between campers may simply be due to their developmental stage/age as they don't have the emotional maturity to control some of their behaviors or emotions on their own yet. Remember, behavior is learned; some kids may resort to conflict because they have not yet learned another way of expressing their emotions.	It is usually much easier to establish desirable behavior patterns than to alter problem behavior after it has started. Clarify what is and is not acceptable behavior and take the time to teach appropriate behavior (what you want them to do). Roll play "what if" scenarios and include campers in problem-solving how they might respond. Allow campers to come up with their own solutions to how they will manage themselves/their group when there is conflict. Help campers to consider everyone's needs when solving conflicts. Use positive reinforcement to help campers learn appropriate behavior; let them know that their good behavior is appreciated. Use positive commands; focus on what you want rather than on what you don't want.
Anxiety about being at camp	Going to camp may be a really tough transition for some kids. For those attending resident camp, this may be their first time sleeping away from home or living away for an extended period. For kids who are less resilient to changes in their lives, coming to camp can produce a higher-than-usual level of anxiety. Even children who have been to camp before can experience stress as they adjust to new and different friends and situations.	Establish yourself as a care provider who they can trust. Create an environment in your group/cabin/activity that is supportive and emotionally safe. Attend to the child's concerns; don't let their feelings be ignored or allowed to linger. Allow the camper to share; they may only need someone to acknowledge that their feelings are normal, and to have someone care that they are having them. Additionally, by listening, you can pick up a lot of information just by letting them talk it out. Don't force the camper into doing things head-on; allow for the anxious child to approach situations gradually. Provide assurances and extra attention and help them find positive ways to deal with their emotions, rather than resorting to negative behavior.
Unstructured downtime or boredom	Sometimes behavior problems result from dissatisfaction or boredom with the activity, or when there is too much unstructured downtime, such as transitions between activity periods. Campers with nothing to do will always find something to do, and that often includes undesirable behaviors, such as rock throwing, stick fighting, horseplay, and literal swinging from the rafters.	Be physically present where your campers are; your physical presence will in itself serve as a deterrent. Keep campers engaged and busy. Modify activities/curriculum if kids are getting bored. Channel creative energy into activity. Intermix high- and low-energy activities throughout the day. Provide more hands-on activities rather than rote learning. Change teaching methods. Plan activities that allow for varying levels of skill, and try to individualize tasks to correspond to each camper's abilities. Give campers responsibilities for leading games, songs, or activities in the in-between times.

Discussion Questions

1. Think of a conflict you had in the past that you feel wasn't resolved well. If you could go back, how would you resolve it now?
2. When should you get your camp supervisor or director involved in conflict resolution?
3. How will you make sure campers understand the rules so they don't become a cause for conflict?