

# CAMP

## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDE

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Neshumah thanks the following members who contributed clinical expertise and/or writing talent to see this booklet come to fruition:

**Yosef Flohr, LMSW (Montreal, Canada)**  
**Chaya Gross, MHC (Monsey)**  
**Yechezkel Lungler, LCSW (New Square)**  
**Chaim Neuhoﬀ, LCSW (Brooklyn)**  
**Mordechai Neuman, LCSW, CASAC-T, (Monsey)**  
**Malky Shaulson, LCSW-R (Brooklyn)**  
**Isaac (Henech) Schwartz, LCSW (Kiryas Joel)**  
**Malki Spira, LMHC (Brooklyn)**  
**Jacob Stauber, LCSW (Monsey)**  
**Tzadok Judah Stern, MS, LMHC, SpEd (Brooklyn)**

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Neshumah focuses on the unique Mental Health needs in Heimishe Communities through education, awareness and advocacy, and by providing appropriate support for its Mental Health professionals of all levels.

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**Comment/questions? [admin@neshumah.life](mailto:admin@neshumah.life)**

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# Camp Behavioral Health and Safety Guide

*A Project of Neshumah, Inc.*

This pamphlet covers the following behavioral health and safety topics, geared specifically for the summer-camp season.

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## Overview

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The conclusion of another school year finds our children eagerly, perhaps anxiously, preparing for summer camp. Those short summer months are sure to create memories, hopefully positive ones, to last a lifetime. They also afford our children some rare and valuable opportunities, such as learning independence, social skills, confidence in exploring their creative or other non-academic talents, just to name a few. However, with our children farther from our reach, they are more vulnerable to a host of undesirable situations. It is our goal to address those important issues herein. Armed with knowledge, parents can make more educated decisions concerning camps for their children.

Always remember to consult a competent professional if any of these issues are not alleviated with these precautionary tips.

## Trust and Open Communication

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The key component to protecting our children and ensuring their well-being is to establish a relationship of open dialogue and unequivocal trust. First and foremost, they must hear, understand and feel that no discussion is off limits, and every concern they bring up is validated without judgement.



When preoccupied with shopping, labeling and packing, it is easy to overlook crucial matters that need to be discussed. Therefore, it is important to set aside time to speak to your children in a calm and comfortable environment, when you are free of distractions and best able to give your undivided attention. This conversation has the power to prevent situations capable of inflicting untold suffering.

## Trust and Responsibility

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This is also a great opportunity to imbue in your children the concept of freewill and responsibility. In camp, there may be less oversight than at home. They will have opportunities to slack in all areas, be it academically, behaviorally, and even emotionally. At the same time, this is the perfect opportunity to grow mature by demonstrating responsibility and self-ownership.

In short: trust is something that is earned. This rule is true for parents and children alike. If you want your children to have an open dialogue with you, make them feel comfortable trusting you. Children should understand that gaining the trust of parents comes with demonstration of responsibility.

## **Safety/Abuse**

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When broaching the subject of safety/abuse, it is important to address it matter-of-factly, so as not to frighten children and make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Discussion of inappropriate physical contact should not be done with too much graphic detail, yet one must ensure that children are absolutely clear about the potential danger.

The information shared does not serve to frighten children, but to empower them. Teach them about prevention, so that they can be proactive rather than reactive, which is especially important when there is an imbalance of power.

Teach them the warning signs:

- The danger often lies in those who single out their victims, and present as ultra- generous and caring.
- Children should be taught the difference between an appropriate relationship and grooming tactics.
- An instance of an individual who pushes to spend alone-time with a child is suspicious.
- Children should be wary of this, and not get into a car or confined space with another individual by themselves without parental permission.
- Parents should be aware of the basic whereabouts of their children at camp.
- Children should understand the concept of their bodies being private, and that no one has the right to touch them inappropriately without their permission.
- Abuse may come from a staff member, strange adult, or an older camper. Children should be aware of that, and encouraged to interact with their peers, rather than older campers.



Children should be reassured that they will be believed if they report any abuse, and should not yield to threats or intimidation. Being warned not to tell is the greatest indicator that something needs to be reported. Any abuse, or even uncomfortable encounter, should be reported to a trusted adult or parent.

Parents should be aware if they see sudden mood changes or loss of appetite and motivation. Some of the most common indicators of trauma and abuse are sudden shifts in behavior and mood, especially withdrawal.

While children are at camp, it is recommended that parents periodically check in with them and question them if any incidents took place. This ensures the child the opportunity to comfortably bring up the topic at any time.

If parents suspect abuse, the first step would be to raise the concern with a trusted head of the camp, so he can look into the matter. If confirmed, immediately address it through a school or outside professional.

## **Bullying**

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Although the term may be broad, bullying boils down to these basic forms:

- Physical Bullying - Bullies may turn physical to inflict physical pain, coerce their subjects to perform a certain task or obtain something for them.
- Verbal Bullying - Ridiculing, name-calling, threatening and intimidating, verbally or in writing, constitutes verbal bullying.
- Social Bullying - Examples of social bullying are: exclusion of the victim from group activities or discussions, public humiliation, inciting others to participate in the above mentioned behaviors.

Alleviating a bullying situation is a complex issue, since telling an adult will likely invite more ridicule and bullying. Any form of bullying must be addressed and tackled with tact. Neglecting it may cause the experience to evolve into a long-term issue with drastic consequences.

Often when a child relays having experienced any form of bullying, it may be an indication of him or her being an easy target of bullying due to social skill deficits. This is not to blame the victim, but oftentimes the situation can be alleviated by the victim becoming more socially aware and more socially active. Camp staff can also choose to give the bully victim special group responsibilities or sports positions which will raise their status amongst their peers. When it comes to physical bullying, which constitutes a form of abuse, it must be stopped by an adult immediately, at all cost.

When it comes to bullying, the majority of children are neither the bully nor the victim. They are non-innocent bystanders. No bullying incident can occur



without bystanders taking the side of the bully. This should not be overlooked by parents and should be discussed with children before camp.

Children should be educated that deciding not to act is also a decision, and it carries responsibility with it. Since bullying is often a recurring event, bystanders have time to regroup and strategize. Firstly, it is always easier to speak up for someone else than it is for oneself. Secondly, it is easier to act when they have had time to think and plan and they are not alone. Besides for reaching out to a responsible adult, they need to support the victim. Even if it is hard to speak out in front of the bully, they can simply stand with the victim in a show of support. Aside from meaning a great deal to the victim, it will also mean a lot to the one supporting the victim as it will fill them with a sense of pride.

Conversely, it's worth also bringing up with your kids the likelihood of them meeting in camp kids from homes which earn them a label (i.e. divorced parents, OTD sibling, medical condition, etc.). It is imperative for your children to realize that camp can heal or destroy such kids forever and that bunk mates will bear that responsibility for ever!

## **Social Anxiety**

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Sleepaway camp can be an exciting, fulfilling and maturing experience; children can become more independent and self-reliant. Some children, however, may be uncertain, or dismissive, of their strengths and abilities, and will shy away from anything that is even somewhat competitive or that puts them in the spotlight. They may avoid participating in various games, activities, or performances. Although this avoidance may stem from a child's personality and shyness, there may be an underlying fear, anxiety, or low self-esteem that hinders their ability to perform. Children may fear that they will make a mistake, embarrass themselves in front of others, or even become the topic of conversation amongst peers.

The following is a quick guide on how to address this issue. This should be further explored with a professional when necessary.

- **Normalize** - Help the child understand that others have this struggle, and that they have a right to have this struggle, and that this is their special challenge in this world, which they have the power to overcome.
- **Recognition** - Every time the child is triggered (i.e. taking part in a competition) they should be aware and acknowledge that their anxiety



just kicked in (rather than making up an excuse why they can't partake in the activity), and they should learn to address their anxiety and negotiate with it.

- Model - It is helpful when children know that this is normal and that others who have struggled have learned to overcome it. Parents can share anecdotes of their own anxieties which they overcame.
- Exposure - Discuss weekly activities the child was able to participate in, and reward them to continue going out of their comfort zone. Don't push your child too far out of their comfort zone but insist on making small efforts.

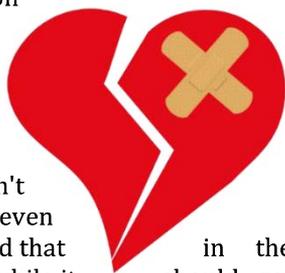
Finally, children should be made aware that camp is a good opportunity to overcome social anxiety. Camp offers a new environment and often with a different set of peers (who are unaware of their social anxiety). This can help a child come out of their old shell and become the child they always wanted to be. (For this reason it may be necessary to attend a different camp than one's peers). It is also important to discuss this with appropriate camp personnel and collaborate on ideas to help the child such as involving them in camp activities.

## Separation Anxiety

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No parent enjoys hearing their child crying on the other end of the line that first day of camp. In some cases the child lies awake nights before camp feeling anxious. In addition to the aforementioned tips on addressing anxiety, here are some simple steps to enable parents to help the separation anxiety commonly associated with camp:

- Prepare - If you notice your child getting anxious as camp approaches, address it: "I see you are a little anxious about camp. It is normal to feel so, especially for a first time camper. Don't worry, you will get over it and you will be fine, even grow fond of it". It is helpful to prepare the child that beginning it may be a little harder, but after a while it easier and they will come to enjoy the experience.
- Plan - Children feel safer when there is a plan in place of how he will be able to contact his parents, who will be his contact person in camp, etc. Discuss the plans with your child; reassure him or her that you will always be reachable.
- A Touch of Home - Send along some of your child's personal belongings, to bring him or her a sense of comfort and familiarity. Also, make sure he or she has a calling card to call home.



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- Present Positive - Reassure your child that you are confident that he or she will like camp. The manner in which parents present to their children helps them with a positive outlook. You can also make a project of working together on his or her independence and growth, so it will help him or her overcome his anxiety. Give them the sense that you trust them. If the child seems anxious, remain level-headed and composed as the adult, rather than becoming anxious with them.

## **Bedwetting**

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Bedwetting affects about 5% of school aged children. Chances are that in any bunk of forty children, two children will have a bedwetting issue. It remains one of the most stigmatized childhood conditions. While bedwetting in a sleepaway camp setting certainly has the potential to be embarrassing, these statistics indicate that it is a more common situation than most parents realize. Make sure your child knows that he or she is not alone.

Camps may be very helpful in discreetly handling such situations and may implement special accommodations to avoid making your child feel uncomfortable. Be upfront with the camp staff and work together to implement a plan. Counselors will often place such children closer to the bathroom, and can also wake them up at night for an extra bathroom trip. Speak to your child about limiting fluid intake after dinner. Also make sure to supply the camp with rubber sheets, as well as extra bedding, pajamas and undergarments.

## **Hygiene**

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Hygiene is closely related to both physical health as well as emotional health. And in camp, not being appropriately prepared in the personal hygiene department (especially for girls) can guarantee a child social discomfort to say the least. At home, there's a mother who can chase the kid into the bath or make sure otherwise that clothing are changed and hair/peyes are made. In camp, to many, it is their first time away from home, and hygiene becomes a new responsibility for them. It would serve your child well to be prepared appropriately by you, rather than rudely by their peers.



## Nutrition

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With all the goings-on of summer camp, nutrition sometimes falls by the wayside. At camp, children are not granted the luxuries of home, such as having their favorite meals cooked for them, or the ability to readily access the refrigerator or pantry. Additionally, social pressure plays a big role as well. When the popular one amongst the children voices their disdain over a particular dish, many may feel pressured to follow suit irrespective of their own opinions.



Skipping meals may result in nutritional deficiencies, which will likely affect their behavioral, emotional, and academic wellbeing. Parents often attempt to compensate for this by sending food from home, or providing the camper with excessive canteen credits. However, parents thereby miss out on the opportunity to teach their children to cultivate their abilities in adaptive behavior, which is crucial in the real world.

Conversely, there are children who overeat at camp, oftentimes necessitating an entire new wardrobe after camp. Both issues can be minimized with proper awareness, information and discussion before camp. Discuss your concerns with your child's pediatrician and/or nutritionist, and have an open conversation with your child on the topic before camp starts.

**"ה' ישמרך מכל-דע, ישמור את-  
נפשך ה' ישמור צאתך ובואך..."**