

Diet-Free Camp Culture

Camp Staff Training

Diets are harmful and are especially harmful to children. You are role models to your campers. We hope you will not bring diet culture into camp. There is not a place at camp for diet culture. However, diets are everywhere in the “real world” and many of us may not even realize what diet culture is or the impact it can have on all of us.

Option: Read this letter from a parent of a camper: **An Open Letter to My Daughter’s Camp Counselor** <https://sunnysideupnutrition.com/letter-to-camp-counselor/>

1. Discussion — What is diet culture?

** Diet culture is not only “being on a diet.” Diet culture is a system of beliefs that is pervasive in our broader culture. It worships the thin ideal and tells people they must be actively eating in a certain way to obtain that ideal. Diet culture equates thinness or weight loss to higher status and thus oppresses those who do not meet that image of “health” or beauty.

Discussion - What are examples of diet culture you have seen in the last 24 hours? (Examples: diet ads, someone commenting on their own diet, someone classifying food as good/bad, a joke on a tv show about someone's weight, ads or images on social media)

2. What is diet talk? Give some examples of “diet talk.”

- “You’re lucky you can get a cookie. I can’t eat that kind of food.”
- “You’re only eating junk”
- “I’m not going to eat that. I’m being good today.”
- “Ugh. I’ve gained so much weight eating camp food.”
- “I’m counting my steps so I can be ready for my cruise.”
- “I need to lose weight.”
- “Sugar is bad.”
- “I’m going to be bad and buy candy from the camp store tonight.”
- “Have you lost weight? You look so good.”
- “You are so skinny. You can eat anything”

3. Why are “diet talk” and diets harmful?

- Diets give the message that certain bodies are acceptable and others are not.
- Children interpret these messages differently than adults. They may be confused by a role model talking about their own diet.
- Adolescents that diet are more likely to exhibit eating disorder behavior 5 years later (1).
- A focus on weight affects children's self esteem (2).

Have you heard of the diet cycle? Many people who diet fall into a lifetime of weight-cycling:

- The Promise: The diet cycle first sucks you in with the promise of feeling better.
- The Praise: Weight loss is praised in our culture, and that feels pretty good.
- The Loss: When you're on a diet you miss out on important things in life, because your brain focuses on food, the basic need you are lacking. You also miss out on the nutrients you need.
- The End: Diets end and the weight comes back, and oftentimes, more weight than was lost (95% of diets fail).
- The Shame: Then, the shame hits. Many people spend their life in this cycle feeling as if there is something wrong with them, rather than the intrinsically flawed diets.
- **Weight cycling and the shame involved is what is harmful to people's health (3).**



4. A note about children's bodies.

- Children are supposed to be gaining weight. Children are growing. Weight gain is a sign of development and health.
- Puberty is a time of significant weight gain and often a time children begin to internalize negative, diet messages.
- If you are working with campers 9 - 17 years old, you probably have campers in various stages of puberty.
- Children gain on average of 40 pounds in the 4 years around puberty.
- Girls' body fat percentage increases by 120% during puberty. It is normal for girls to gain weight around their torso during puberty. However, diet culture tells us this is a "bad thing."
- 2 in 3 13-year-old girls are fearful of gaining weight (4).

***** Discussion: When you were younger do you remember the messages you received about diets and dieting?**

5. All bodies are different.

It's important to acknowledge body diversity! Look around, we all have different hair colors, skin colors, heights, shoe sizes, eye colors, body shapes and body weights. At camp, we value all bodies!

6. You are a role model.

While we can't and wouldn't tell you not to diet (although we hope you won't!), it is important to remember you are a role model to your campers. The campers are watching your every move and listening to every word. When you criticize your body or talk about food as "good" and "bad," they hear you. When you focus on shrinking your body or counting steps rather than putting that energy into climbing the tower or playing basketball, you model that weight is most important. The campers want to be like you. Just as we won't talk about alcohol in front of campers, we will not talk expose children to diet talk.

7. Brainstorm

As a small group, brainstorm ways you can model body positive behaviors to your campers. (Examples: talk about food in a neutral way, don't compare bodies, avoid praising weight loss, focus on what bodies can DO, model being active and trying new things, don't talk about diets or dieting, avoid using or discuss fitness trackers)

8. But what about health? Dieting and restricting intake is not healthy. Modeling taking care of the body you have promotes health. This is a complex topic that can be a whole weekend training. However, we know diets cause harm — leading to eating disorders and weight cycling. Weight cycling is linked to many of the health concerns people frequently attribute to weight. Research shows if we stop dieting and weight cycling there would be a significant positive health outcome.

9. Other Resources:

- Sunny Side Up Nutrition www.sunnysideupnutrition.com
- "What is Diet Culture?" by Christy Harrison <https://christyharrison.com/blog/what-is-diet-culture>
- *Body Respect* by Bacon and Aphramor
- *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family* by Ellyn Satter
- Food Psych Podcast by Christy Harrison
- Love, Food Podcast by Julie Duffy Dillon
- *Real Kids Come in All Sizes: Ten Essential Lessons to Build Your Child's Body Esteem*, Kathy Kater

10. References

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2. Davison KK, Birch LL. Weight status, parent reaction, and self-concept in five-year-old girls. *Pediatrics*. 2001;107:46–53.
3. Kajioka, Taeko et al. Effects of intentional weight cycling on non-obese young women *Metabolism - Clinical and Experimental* , Volume 51 , Issue 2 , 149 - 154.
4. Nadia Micali, George Ploubidis, Bianca De Stavola, Emily Simonoff, Janet Treasure. Frequency and Patterns of Eating Disorder Symptoms in Early Adolescence. *J ournal of Adolescent Health*, 2013

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