



# Diet-Free Camp Culture

## Camp Staff Training

Diets are harmful and are especially harmful to children. Dieting and experiencing "weight talk" are significant risk factors for developing eating disorders. Experiencing weight stigma, the discrimination against or stereotyping individuals based on weight, leads to depression, anxiety, poor body image, social isolation, and unhealthy eating behaviors.

As camp staff, YOU are role models to your campers. Campers are always listening and watching you. There is no place at camp for diet culture. We strive for our camp culture to be diet-free. 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**" (**Attached below**) <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."

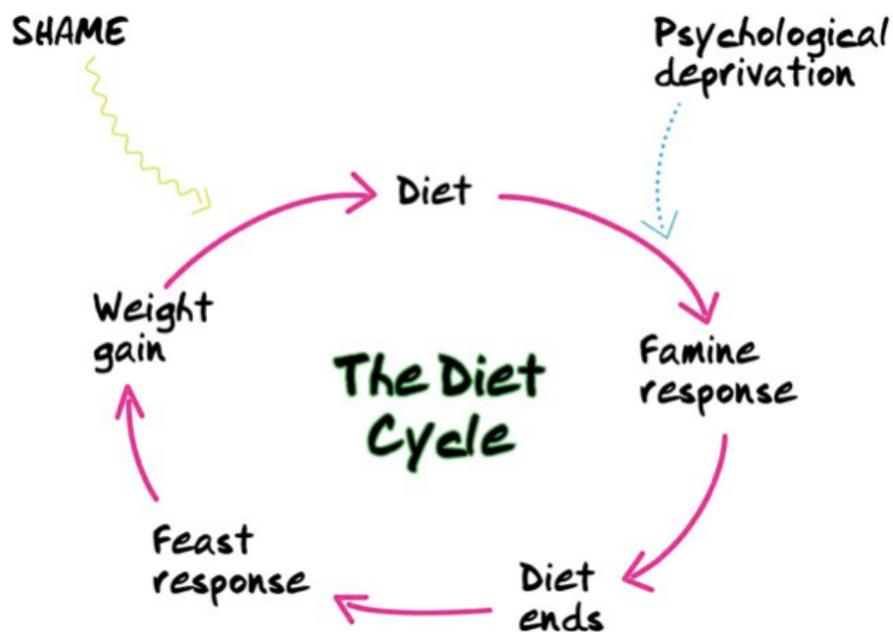
- "You're lucky you can get a cookie. I can't eat that kind of food."
- "You're only eating junk"
- "I'm not going to eat that. I'm being 'good' today."
- "Ugh. I've gained so much weight eating camp food."
- "I'm counting my steps so I can be ready for my cruise."
- "I need to lose weight."
- "Sugar 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, avoid jokes about people's bodies)



**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 significant positive health outcomes.

#### **9. Other Resources:**

- Sunny Side Up Nutrition Blog and Podcast: [www.sunnysideupnutrition.com](http://www.sunnysideupnutrition.com)
- *Raise An Intuitive Eater*, Brooks and Severson
- *Raising Body Positive Teens*, Darpinian, Sterling and Aggarwal
- *Anti-Diet*, Harrison

#### **References**

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4. Nadia Micali, George Ploubidis, Bianca De Stavola, Emily Simonoff, Janet Treasure. Frequency and Patterns of Eating Disorder Symptoms in Early Adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2013.

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# An Open Letter to My Daughter's Camp Counselor

Dear Camp Counselor,

As you know, I picked up my daughter from overnight camp over the weekend. When I arrived at camp, I was greeted by a huge smile and long hug. I think she grew an inch while she was away. She looks forward to the 2 weeks she spends at overnight camp more than any other time of the year. She loves the rock climbing, swimming and kayaking. She loves the camp traditions, friendships and the feeling of freedom she has when she's at camp. Most of all, though, she loves the teenage and young adult counselors. She looks up to you and watches your every move. That's why I'm writing you this letter. You may be surprised that one of the first things she told me about camp was that you were on a diet. She explained that you were getting ready to "look good in your bathing suit" for an upcoming post-camp tropical trip. She said you were counting your steps and talking about what you were not eating. Did you know she was listening? Did you know she looks up to you and wants more than anything to be a camp counselor one day? She wants to be just like you.

I don't think your intent was to teach young girls about dieting or to introduce the idea that making yourself smaller is a good idea. I don't think for a second that you were trying to cause the 11 years olds in your cabin harm. I assume you spend your summer at camp because you love children and love camp. You and I both know it's not for the money. Because of your love for children and camp, I want you to know and understand that when you have twelve 11 year olds under your care, negative comments about your body or about restricting food need to be kept to after "lights out" or written in an email or letter home. You are in a pivotal position to have a lasting impact on these girls' lives. All people in influential positions that work with children, camp counselors, parents, coaches, and educators, need to understand the impact of diets and restrictive food messages on our children. I believe if you understood that, you wouldn't have talked about your pre-beach diet to the girls in your cabin.

You may wonder why I'm so concerned about a camp counselor modeling dieting behavior. My concern is multilayered. I am a Registered Dietitian that specializes in eating disorders. I unfortunately see first hand the harm our diet culture causes people throughout their lifetime. I'm concerned because dieting is a risk factor for developing an eating disorder. We know that adolescents that diet are more likely to exhibit eating disorder behavior 5 years later. Many people who diet fall into a lifetime of diet cycling. You may be too young to have fully witnessed or experienced the diet cycle, although I know many teenagers who have.



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The diet cycle first sucks you in with the promise of feeling better. Then, you lose weight and get praised for the weight 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. The diet ends and the weight comes back and oftentimes more weight than was lost (because 95% of diets fail). 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. We know that this weight cycling and the shame involved is what is harmful for people's health. Not to mention, diets suck the joy out of life. I want something different for my daughter and her fellow cabin mates.

I'm also concerned because diet messages can have a huge impact on adolescents' self esteem. Did you know you had a particularly vulnerable age of campers in your cabin for messages of body hatred and dieting? The girls in your cabin are going through or about to go through puberty. Did you notice your cabin photo — all of your girls were all lined up in two rows in front of the mountain view? They were of many different heights, shapes and sizes. Your cabin picture looked really different from the cabin photo of the 7 years olds and from the photo of the 15 year olds. There's a biological reason for that. When girls go through puberty their body fat percentage increases by 120%, compared to a decrease in body fat percentage for boys. It's normal for their bodies to become more round prior to their first period. However, this is just the age they start to hear about dieting or trying to change their bodies. They don't have to hear that at camp. I've heard the statistic that 2 in 3 13-year-old girls are fearful of gaining weight and 1 in 3 do not like their current weight status. Think about that, girls are fearful of gaining weight when they need to be gaining weight. Gaining weight, particularly fat mass, is what their bodies are meant to do so that they can become women. These girls need to hear that bodies are to be trusted during this time that their bodies are different than they have ever been in their life. They need to know it's important to trust their hunger especially because their nutritional needs are higher than they have ever been in their lives. When they run, climb, dance and play at camp they need to do that because it feels good, not because they "should" or a step counter tells them to do it more. However, when they hear a trusted counselor wanting to change her body to "look good," how do you think that effects their vulnerable minds?



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I certainly don't blame you. You, too, are swimming in this diet culture of ours. You may have had a parent, teacher or counselor model to you about diets, weight loss or body hatred. You may think diet talk is commonplace and didn't think a thing of it. How are you to know any differently when so many people spend time criticizing their own bodies or talking about their latest diet? I don't blame you and at the same time I want to provide you with this knowledge because you can make a difference. It's possible to change our culture so that girls and boys grow up to not question their bodies. Camp is a place that can and needs to be free of diet talk. Camp's mission is to teach character values and it's greatest asset is that its isolated from our larger culture. If camp counselors are empowered with the knowledge of how diet's harm and how to talk about their own bodies and food around children, than you all could make an even bigger difference in these children's lives. I'm happy to talk to you more about this. I think these topics need to be a part of camp's staff training each summer because you work so intimately with children. If you're interested in reading more about the harm diets cause children, read my post about Weight Watchers marketing to children.

I thank you for all you did for my daughter those two weeks. I hope my letter is not accusatory, but rather interesting to you. I truly do believe that we can stop the cycle of body hatred, dieting, and shame with this generation of children. I believe that it's possible when my daughter is a camp counselor, it won't even cross her mind to try to change her body for a bathing suit, but rather she'll enjoy her wonderful body that helps her do all the amazing activities at camp.

Sincerely,

Your camper's mom