

## Feature

# New Safety Training Program for Camp Counselors

Rivka had really been enjoying her job as counselor at sleepaway camp this summer until she noticed her camper Baila routinely picking at her food before tossing her plate in the garbage. When confronted, Baila said shortly, "I'm just trying to watch my weight. In fact," she confided, "I've even lost five pounds!" Rivka glanced at Baila's thin frame and wondered if this was normal seventh-grade-girl behavior...

Yaakov is at his wits' end. His group of 18 six-year-old boys has recently begun making fun of Shloime and excluding him from their games. It's bad enough that Shloime is the youngest in the group, but he also has a terrible stutter that makes it difficult for him to get his words out. Yaakov knows it's his responsibility to do something; he just doesn't know what or how. The end of the summer seems like light-years away...

Unfortunately, the issues confronting our camp counselors today are becoming more and more complicated. What was once perhaps viewed as an easy summer job for our adolescents, good for providing some spending money and structure, has by now transformed into a role heavy with responsibility.

We are asking a lot of our young people, not only to safeguard the physical well-being of our children, but to monitor their social, mental and emotional temperatures as well. In assuming this position, these teenagers may find themselves abruptly promoted to adulthood, often faced with challenges of monumental proportions.

The average teen is not equipped to deal with situations involving bullying, eating disorders, health problems, or death or divorce in the family. The issues are there; the camps are aware. What can we do to help our counselors?

Enter Project SafeCamp. Project SafeCamp is a new, comprehensive and highly professional counselor training program designed to educate and empower young adults as they face increasingly difficult situations that exist in

many Jewish summer camps today.

Originated by licensed therapists, Project SafeCamp fills the void in counselor education as expressed by camp directors, administrators, and the counselors themselves.

For many years, Debbie Fox, LCSW, creator of Project SafeCamp, has conducted counselor-training sessions covering these sensitive topics. Beginning at Aleinu Family Resource Center, a program of Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles, Mrs. Fox is the originator of the internationally renowned Safety Kid® Program, which continues to educate over 20,000 students in the yeshivah system about abuse awareness and prevention.

Mrs. Fox's desire to promote safety for children did not stop there; she went on to establish her own organization called Magen Yeladim: Child Safety Institute, an agency geared toward developing and instituting programs that increase child safety. Project SafeCamp, the newest program of Magen Yeladim, is the culmination of years of research and experience combined with current fieldwork and technology, yielding a progressive and widely acclaimed counselor training program.

Unique to this program is its varying means of accessibility. In attempting to schedule training sessions for various camps in a given area, Mrs. Fox discovered that coordination was almost impossible; each camp had a different start date. In addition, it was often difficult to provide an available trained professional who would best cater to the camp in question. The combination of these two problems resulted in rushed and haphazard training sessions that left counselors with an inadequate knowledge base and insufficient preparedness skills.

Prompted by this conflict, Mrs. Fox enabled her program to be completed online. The format is comprised of four training modules, separate for males and females, that present the information in a clear and concise way. After viewing the four videos of expert licensed professionals speaking on their respective topics, counselors take a short quiz and receive a certificate of completion after passing.

Counselors are able to participate in the entire

## Important Tips for Counselors:

1. The counselor has the most influence on the success of his or her campers' summer. The impact of the counselor will influence the campers' memories — positive or otherwise — that will last a lifetime.
2. Do not ask a bully and victim to work things out on their own. Both of them need to know that a responsible, caring authority will help them.
3. What did you admire most about your favorite counselor? Be like that counselor! You too can be a "favorite" counselor.
4. Remember that campers are there to be friends with other campers. Avoid developing special relationships with any camper(s).
5. Bullying most often happens when campers are unsupervised. Be there and be aware!

training session from the comfort of their own homes on their own time.

Camps who prefer to have their counselors trained in person can opt to join a scheduled seminar at a predetermined local venue or request a session on their actual campgrounds. Local venues include areas such as Flatbush, Lakewood, Crown Heights and Los Angeles.

How did Project SafeCamp determine which pressing issues to address in the new counselor training program? For months prior to the inception of Project SafeCamp, Mrs. Fox, along with her Project Coordinator, Miriam Turk, LCSW, who is well known to the camping community, interviewed directors from camps all over the country, asking them to share the areas they felt needed the most attention.

Not surprisingly, the results were quite similar across the board. It seemed there were four main issues that caused their adolescents confusion and challenge.

1. **Boundaries:** Counselors appeared to be unsure as to the proper balance between relate-ability and professionalism with the campers.

2. **High-risk situations:** Issues campers face ranging from eating disorders, anxiety, family trauma and emotional disturbances were causing unequipped teens some anxiety of their own.

3. **Bullying:** At a loss over what to do, counselors often found themselves unwittingly siding with the bully due to the latter's popularity and charisma, thereby causing further hurt and emotional damage to the camper.

4. **Preventing inappropriate touch in camp:** Counselors desired to know how to protect their

campers as well as how to act appropriately if faced with signs of abuse and in the case of disclosure.

The Project SafeCamp model, endorsed by Harav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *shlita*, addresses these four issues and more. The program has also received applause from noted camp authorities such as Rabbi Ronald Greenwald of Camp Sternberg and Meir Frischman of Camp Agudah.

The program introduces guidelines for discipline, maintaining healthy interpersonal boundaries, dealing with high-risk issues, responding to unexpected crisis in the life of a camper, and effective and proper ways to deal with the personal safety and the psychosocial well-being of each individual in a camp.

Camps work hard to provide an all-around enjoyable summer experience for our children. "It is the responsibility of every camp director to always look for new ways to improve safety in their camp," maintains Rabbi Greenwald. Project SafeCamp embodies this goal and aims to ensure that camp staff members are able to recognize potential problems and feel confident taking the appropriate steps when necessary. Counselors can enter the summer session empowered, educated and prepared, and parents can breathe a little more easily knowing their children are enjoying their summer in the safest camp environment possible.

Project SafeCamp has enjoyed a highly positive reception from a wide array of camps serving the many different *chareidi* and *chassidische* facets of our communities. Ultimately, one of Project SafeCamp's goals is to implement this training in all *frum* camps as the program continues to expand to cover further important material.

There are many ways to save a life. We all acknowledge the importance of training our counselors in emergency response, CPR and first aid. With Project SafeCamp, we ensure that our children's minds, hearts and souls receive the same amount of attention.

Says Meir Frischman, "The Project SafeCamp program is the counselor training model we have been waiting for. I recommend every camp become a SafeCamp." With Hashem's help, they hope to provide kids with the safest, happiest camp experiences possible.

For further information about Project SafeCamp or to schedule a training session, please contact [info@projectsafecamp.com](mailto:info@projectsafecamp.com) or call (347)762-7276.

