IV. BUILDING AWARENESS OF THE CAMPER

If you desire to help children of abuse, you must understand how their abuse has affected them. You must also understand that the abuse has not permanently damaged them. Your knowledge of the campers and your belief that YOU can create an environment that will make a difference, will significantly help YOU to make life-changing moments for the campers.

A. Similarities and differences

It is impossible to watch out for trouble and have a normal childhood at the same time.
—Doris Sanford

Children are individuals with their own characteristic ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and perceiving themselves and the world around them. At any local RFKC, developmentally delayed children are mixed in with resilient children who are progressing normally and even thriving. Taken together, one may witness child development that stretches from age three (e.g. an emotionally immature seven-year-old) to fifteen (an early-maturing, "parentified" eleven-year-old).

What is it about abuse and neglect that alters the normal flow of human development? There are so many things, actually. For some campers problems begin in prenatal or perinatal life with fetal alcohol effects, drug addiction, inadequate medical care, and stressful teen pregnancies. In early postnatal life, one could add malnutrition, attachment failure, and an unstimulating environment. Some of these conditions contribute to developmental delays and learning disabilities. Some have serious head injuries as a result of physical abuse. Others have chronic sleep disorders arising from emotional trauma that has stunted their growth.

All RFK volunteers share a common humanity with their campers. Many adult volunteers are “children at heart.” Nevertheless, there may be some significant differences between adult volunteers and campers that could be beneficial to observe.
1. How are RFK campers different from most of us?

Our campers are both similar to and different from us. They are children; we are adults. Campers, in contrast to us have:

- Greater racial, ethnic, and cultural variation
- Greater diversity of religious [and non-religious] backgrounds
- More diverse and less favorable family backgrounds
- More mobility and disruption of family life
- A background of abuse and neglect [Only 1 of 100 children in general have a DSS substantiated case of abuse. RFK campers all have this in common.]

Too much emphasis on similarities with little awareness of or respect for differences can be problematic at camp. For example, if we think of our campers as “just like any normal group of kids” we may not prepare ourselves adequately for the specific kinds of behaviors that abused and neglected children may display in a camp setting. Recognizing important differences may yield insights that help us provide the best possible milieu for these children.

Can you think of differences between campers and most adult volunteers that may have implications for camp?

2. How are RFK campers different from children in general?

“Seven to eleven from heaven.” This is a phrase that Wayne and Diane Tesch frequently use to indicate the appropriate age range for RFK campers. These are the chronological ages that define middle childhood.

The average middle years child is in elementary school, has the ability to read and write, and is accustomed to the daily routines of public school. Middle years children tend to have good self-management skills. Though they may need a little pushing and prodding, they can dress and care for themselves, settle minor disputes, eat and work independently, and play cooperatively. Middlers are active learners. They are more rational than preschoolers, and can delay gratification of their impulses and keep emotional outbursts under control. Middlers are growing in their awareness of others and are getting better at discerning just what another person is thinking and feeling.

Middle years children from good homes tend to have most, if not all of these qualities. Many of our campers may evidence deficiencies in these areas. A local RFKC may run better and accomplish more positive
outcomes with campers when counselors and staff members recognize deficiencies in trust, self-worth, self-control, and other basic developmental skills and respond appropriately.

3. Developmental exceptions and extremes. The middle years of childhood are the common denominator of RFKC. However, there will be children at camp who do not fit the norm. Let's take a look at some examples.

a. Functional Preschoolers
A seven-year-old child may be “developmentally arrested or delayed” and may therefore be the functional equivalent of a preschooler. If so, some of the following characteristics may pertain to this child.
- Poor self-management skills; needs a lot of assistance with personal tasks such as dressing, bathing, grooming, eating, and going to the bathroom.
- Very dependent, perhaps even clingy. May constantly need to be comforted, and reassured; may be very touch or contact-oriented.
- Emotionally unstable and impulsive; emotions and impulses quickly overrun child's limited rational capacity.
- Highly egocentric; cannot distinguish own thoughts and feelings from those of others: projects personal and family experience into current situation; "wears personality on sleeve."

b. Functional Adolescents
By contrast, an 11-year-old may be a big, bright, early-maturer who has found the resources to thrive under adverse conditions. This child may be the functional equivalent of an adolescent. If so, some of the following characteristics may apply.
- Quite large or tall, perhaps even bigger than his or her counselor. (Important to realize that a child's social, intellectual, and emotional maturity may not correspond to his or her physical size. A physically large child may be immature in other ways.)
- Physically mature; possibly sexually active.
- Reasons very well; able to think about problems and situations on a higher, more sophisticated level.
- Bored or “put off” — may quickly size up that the RFKC program is geared to a lower common age denominator and that many
of the programs and activities are not very challenging or stimulating.

B. Accelerated Development

Children are inherently wired to recuperate from various forms of adversity. Consider the common developmental example of giving birth to twins. When a single baby is born, it is usually about 7 pounds and 20 inches. When twins are born they are typically much shorter and lighter. Prenatal twins mature in a crowded womb with limited resources. These diminished resources stunt their height and weight. However, once born into an outer world with unlimited resources, twins grown faster than normal until they catch up. In short, we all have a built in capacity to “bounce back” from adverse conditions.

How is this principle of accelerated development relevant to our campers? There are interesting parallels between what happens in the womb and what happens to abused and neglected children. By definition, neglected children do not have their basic needs for food, shelter, supervision, safety, or love met on a consistent basis. These deficiencies will likely result in diminished growth in one or more areas [physical, social, emotional, intellectual, moral, spiritual]. When neglected children come to an RFKC they find themselves in a specially crafted, nurturing environment with positive attention and support. When campers establish enough trust to engage the camp program, they are likely to grow socially, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually in a manner that may well exceed what children from well functioning families might accomplish.

“I’m an artist” — The Case of Andy

Consider the case of Andy who came to an RFKC from an abusive background. Prior to camp he had a very low sense of self-worth and his lack of positive attention created some serious behavioral management issues.

It just so happened that Andy’s counselor was an art professor and he spent lots of time drawing out Andy’s own artistic potential. Andy and his counselor bonded well that week. By Friday, Andy was a self-proclaimed artist. The activities center became a staging area for Andy’s newfound artistic creativity, and he took advantage of every minute available to him to “live out” his newfound identity. Andy could be seen “cranking out pipe cleaner creations” under his counselor’s loving, encouraging supervision until the last minute of activities time was
expended. It was Andy’s time and opportunity to grow and he seemed to be making the most of it.

The volunteers at the camp, including Andy’s former counselor, had an opportunity to reconnect with him several years later at a special staff training session. Andy was now an artist in every sense of the word and was in college studying graphic design. He recalled his time at camp with his counselor as a critical time in his life that drew out some of his inner potential and set him on a path that he still follows.

C. Child Resiliency

The more formal term for “bouncing back from adversity” is resiliency. Patterson [2001] defines resiliency as the ability of every child to overcome adversity if important protective factors are present in one’s life. Although resiliency may be inherent in children, it can also be enhanced by the protective factors we provide at camp.

In addition to Patterson’s [2001] article [Resiliency: A key for supporting youth-at-risk. Childhood Education, Washington, D.C.], Dr. Robert Brooks, at Harvard Medical School, has many additional resources on resiliency available on his website at http://drrobertbrooks.com

Years of research have led to the identification of many factors that promote child resiliency. These factors can be summed up in three words:

- Milieu (environment)
- Mentors
- Message

Create the right milieu, enlist good mentors, frame the message properly and one can create “turning points” or “moments that matter” for abused and neglected children.

Milieu – the camper’s external and internal environment

Theoretically, if we knew everything possible about what it takes to enhance the resiliency of children we could create the ideal external environment for that to happen. To the extent that we understand at least some of the key factors associated with child resiliency,

the question then becomes...“How can we structure an external environment that is maximally beneficial for the abused and neglected child?” What would be some of the key structural elements of such an environment?
Undoubtedly, an RFKC in the “cathedral of the outdoors” helps to foster child resiliency. Factors such as a residential camp experience, a two-to-one camper to counselor ratio, cooperative interaction that limits harmful competition, a well-structured program and the focus on creating positive memories are all aspects of RFKC that help to promote child resilience.

Phil Quinn at the March 2001 RFK Leadership Seminar [Irvine, CA] acknowledged the value of a well-structured camp environment, but spoke also of an “internal” environment. “It is not enough to structure an ideal external environment. One should attempt to restructure the internal environment of the child as well. For example, one can replace self-depricating and self-defeating talk with self, life, world, other, and God-affirming talk. One can replace “I can’t” or “I’m not good enough” or “I’m ugly” or “No one can possibly love me” with their opposites. One can reshape the child’s image of self from “bad kid” to “royal family member” or the body as “fat”, “handicapped” or “ugly” into “temple of the living God”.

Emmy Werner, a pioneering researcher on child resiliency, claims that resilient children tend to have four central characteristics in common:

- an active, evocative approach to solving life's problems enabling them to successfully navigate their way around emotionally hazardous experiences,
- a tendency to perceive their experiences constructively even if they caused pain or suffering,
- the ability to gain positive attention from other people, and
- the ability to use faith to sustain a positive vision of a meaningful life. Children who have these qualities tend to elicit positive responses from family members as well as resource persons outside the family.


In general, provide campers with “tools” to help them help themselves. To the extent that we can help children develop empathy, self-esteem, social competence, and the ability to plan and set goals, we move them in the direction of greater resiliency.

Volunteers at local RFKCs can seek to structure many things inside the camper including:
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- Trust
- Self-worth and self-esteem
- Skill development
- Knowledge of appropriate boundaries
- Ability to plan and to solve problems
- Ability to use faith and to reframe circumstances in positive ways
- Ability to locate helpful resources

**Mentors – the “catalysts” who bring it all to life**

One cannot simply design a milieu [i.e. camp environment] and place a bunch of kids in it. A mentor is an essential catalyst who brings children and milieu together in ways that create positive memories and defining moments. Research studies have identified characteristics of mentors that foster resiliency. At any local RFKC characteristics of good counselors include:

- Love for children and ability to engage them in positive ways
- Ability to listen to children and communicate well with them
- Experience and training related to child maltreatment and behavior management as well as team-building and helpful information on the RFK mission and purpose
- Ability to seek help from others when needed
- Stamina to endure the rigors of a challenging week

In addition to the above qualities, RFK staff members should have expertise in their specific areas of responsibility [i.e. nursing, drama, music, recreation, activities, etc.]. What other characteristics are important for RFK volunteers?

Those responsible for assembling the team of RFKC mentors should:

- Select individuals who possess desirable qualities
- Train volunteers annually to enhance their ability to work with abused and neglected children
- Support volunteers at camp with timely assistance and regular breaks

Phil Quinn [2002] sees the value of empathy in a mentor; however, empathy should not be reduced to pity. As he points out, mentors are most helpful not so much when they pity children and see their suffering
but when they see and affirm their individual potential and foresee their healing.

**Message – helping campers to frame experiences in ways that heal**

One important aspect of interacting with children at camp is helping them to reframe negative experiences in ways that heal and help them to move forward. We need to help children:

- Enlarge their world
- Frame experiences more constructively
- Acquire healthy expectations and a sense of hope
- Bring purpose and meaning to life
- Use personal faith as a tool for understanding and recovery

As Wolin and Wolin [1983] point out, “While you cannot change the past, you can change the way you understand it. You can frame your story around themes of your resilience or themes of your damage. You can find reason to be proud in some of your worst memories, or you can let yourself be overwhelmed by the harm of it all.”

As local RFKCs seek to create a “premium blend” of milieu, mentors, and message they will provide “turning points” or “moments that matter” for children. It is interesting to note that the name “Royal Family Kids’ Camp” actually embodies the key factors associated with child resiliency.

**ROYAL = Message**

- Framing the message – RFK campers have a royal heritage and they are part of God’s royal family. As such they deserve royal treatment.

**FAMILY = Mentors**

- The counselors and staff of RFKC are the mentors who bring the RFKC program to life for the campers.

**KIDS = Internal milieu**

- Camp is for the campers. The primary focus of any RFKC is the campers. We seek to provide positive experiences for them and to promote qualities within children [self-esteem, playfulness, hope, skills, etc.] that help them to go forward.

**CAMP = External milieu**
RFKC provides a one-week, residential environment for abused and neglected children in the cathedral of the outdoors. Everything about the RFK camp environment should be structured to foster positive memories and resiliency in children.

If we can find ways to tilt the balance and to promote resilient qualities in our campers or the camp setting, then the RFKC week of fun-filled activities and positive memories will not simply come to a crashing halt. If RFK campers can find ways to cast off behaviors that repel resources, adopt behaviors that invite positive attention and support, develop more self-worth, and find positive ways to frame experiences, then they will truly take from camp far more than they leave behind.

Supplemental developmental material –
Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development applied to RFKC

According to Erikson, the major elements of human personality arise at critical times in infancy and early childhood. These elements result from an interplay between the child's needs and his or her surroundings. For example, the newborn is utterly dependent on caregivers. If needs are met in a loving and consistent manner, the infant will develop an overriding sense of trust. If the infant's needs are met, but without love and consistency, then mistrust may prevail over trust.

Trust is the very cornerstone of healthy development. Trust and attachment provide the emotional security one needs to "venture forth" or explore one's surroundings--to learn about oneself, other people, and the world. One cannot skirt this issue. It is absolutely foundational.

In toddlerhood, trust promotes the development of autonomy and the ability to exercise choice. In middle childhood the healthy child is a prolific master of skills who interacts well with peers and learns actively from adult mentors.

Applying Erikson to RFKC. Every child at Royal Family KIDS Camp is chronologically a middler, but where are they psychosocially? The psychological dimensions of trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry blossom in social surroundings that consistently offer safety, love, acceptance, and close personal attention. RFK campers have been removed from life-threatening and neglectful social settings. The backgrounds of many RFK children are in direct opposition to the social environment Erikson deems desirable. How can the counselors, staff, and
camp setting of RFKC help meet the *psychosocial* needs of abused and neglected children?

Alice Honig (1993) identifies several tell-tale signs that a child's psychosocial development has been arrested at some critical point. Her list includes:

- Dull eyes without sparkle.
- Eye gaze avoidance.
- Lack of friendliness to loving adult overtures.
- Fearful withdrawal/flinching when loving adult tries to hug or touch.
- Rare smiles despite loving adult elicitation.
- Frozen affect (e.g. apathetic or dour look).
- Impassiveness or anger when a peer becomes hurt or depressed.
- Biting or hitting of others with insufficient provocation.
- Little if any interest in peers.
- Sleep and eating difficulties.
- Compulsive body rocking.
- Scattered attention.
- Anxious shadowing of counselor without letup.
- Avoidance of/indifference to parent during camp visits or at pick-up time.

Some kids come to RFKC with a deep suspicion and mistrust of others as can be seen in their wariness, shyness, and withdrawal. Mistrust holds them back from positive interactions with their counselor, coach, grandma, or buddy camper. But inside, there lurks a profoundly deep need to trust--all too long denied. RFK’s residential camp setting with its emphasis upon safety and positive affirmation soon opens the child's heart and a different demeanor may appear.

A trusting child quickly becomes a venturesome child with an urgency to make up for lost time. You may see wariness dissolve in a few days at the swimming pool. Initially, there are several children who slowly enter the water and hold fast to the side of the pool, preferring their own company. However, by the middle of the week, you are likely to see happy, playful children leaping from the side of the pool into the outstretched arms of counselors and staff members. You may also see children teaming up creatively to maximize their fun.
Trust leads to activity. Activity gets channeled into specific crafts, games, and exercises. New physical, mental, and interpersonal skills are formed as campers reach levels of psychosocial development appropriate for their age. Ben Fanton, a former head of Child Protective Services [Allegany County, NY] made this comment after watching a pool full of happy, playful kids, most of whom were wards of New York State "under his watch." “This says it all to me. I cannot tell our kids from any group of kids at this point.”

The RFKC setting has great potential for fostering healthy psychosocial development in children of abuse & neglect.

Close

What are your personal take-a-ways from this section?