

The Dangers of Labeling

From lowering self-esteem to adding undue pressure, labeling campers is not in anyone's best interest.

We live our lives surrounded by labels. We see them in supermarkets, in advertisements, and we even use them subconsciously throughout the day. However, we never stop to realize the dangers of using labels as they apply to people and, more specifically, to children. In school, labeling manifests itself as peer pressure for children to do better and meet the expectations of parents and teachers

Often in camping, we tend to label children without realizing the dangers inherent in such pigeonholing. From lowering self-esteem to eliminating motivation, labeling children can be extremely harmful.

When you label a child, it closes the mind of the person doing the labeling. Once you have decided that a child acts a certain way, lacks certain athletic ability, or does not know how to get along with his or her peers, there is little that the

youngster can do to change your mind. This makes it virtually impossible for the child to rise to the level of expectation you have for the other campers. It is important to remember that nobody rises to low expectations.

Children who are labeled do not always make it obvious that their feelings are hurt. They might not be able to verbalize their emotions and some have been negatively labeled so often in their lives, they don't even show how they feel in their expressions. This makes it very difficult to see how much damage is actually being done to the individual involved.

Contrary to what some believe, even

“positive” labeling may result in a negative outcome. A camper who is labeled a “jock” or “super athlete” will feel an enormous amount of pressure to score the winning touchdown or hit the winning home run, for fear of losing the label of “best athlete in the group.” We have seen what these pressures to perform at high levels have done to professional athletes; imagine what they do to a child!

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Camp must always be a place where children constantly feel safe, both physically and emotionally. You truly can't have one without the other. A young person must feel safe to fail. It is then the responsibility of the caretaker, be it a counsellor, group leader or camp director, to assist the camper in effectively navigating the skills necessary to improve in whatever area is deficient. Whether it is sports or communicating with peers or adults, this is the time to take advantage of the situation and help the child gain confidence by teaching positive ways to address the situation.

It is important to note that the same dangers of labeling campers hold true to staff members. How often do we call one counsellor or group leader a “superstar,” while we say another is “lazy.” When a staff member gets wind of that kind of negativity, what is his/her motivation to try harder? We must ask ourselves what we can do to bring poor performing staff members to a higher level.

Since it takes 10 positive strokes to make up for one negative stroke, it is most important that we focus on the positive whenever possible and leave the labels where they belong — on the Campbell's soup can! **CC**

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