



The Awkward Taco: Social Skills at Camp

HOW DO LAGGING SOCIAL SKILLS AFFECT KIDS?

- ★ May think “friends” are those who don’t pick on them or who will simply talk to them at lunch or on the playground
- ★ When asked, they can’t define “friendship”
- ★ The child next door, who has grown up “tolerating” and “understanding” them, is a “friend,” even though he/she is 5 years younger
- ★ Not invited to birthday parties or play dates
- ★ Success in the world as an adult is determined by social skills
 - ★ Workplace interactions
 - ★ Romantic opportunities, etc.
- ★ These needs impact every moment of their lives – they can’t get away from them and they can’t just “shut them off.”



WHAT DO WE SEE AT CAMP?

- ★ Isolated from the group
- ★ Tolerated when staff are watching but never invited to join if optional
- ★ Solitary pursuits – reading during “rec time,” at the table, at campfires
- ★ May attach to one “nice” kid and limit *that* child’s social interactions
- ★ Frustrated bunkmates, the “uncool kid”
- ★ Limited understanding of sarcasm, shades of gray, joking around
- ★ Frustrated/angry because they think they’re being made fun of
- ★ “Placeholder” strategies to “get through the day” like reading at the lunch table
- ★ “He’s so annnnooooooyyyyyyying”



WHY IS CAMP A GOOD PLACE TO TEACH SOCIAL SKILLS?



- ★ Likely labeled at school, and “stuck” with it. Children are permanent and pervasive thinkers. Once they’ve decided another child is “strange” it’s hard to change their perception
- ★ At camp, kids can start fresh
- ★ Unlike “manufactured” social group situations, camp has teachable moments
- ★ Intensive immersion in social dynamics





The Awkward Taco: Social Skills at Camp, Continued

FACILITATING FRIENDSHIPS & PLAY

Stages of Play

- ★ Staff should understand the major stages of play and be able to identify campers' current stages
- ★ Solitary – alone, even when around others
- ★ Onlooker – watch others play, not joining in
- ★ Parallel – playing same thing, next to, not “with”
- ★ Associative – interaction with others, imitation
- ★ Cooperative – working together, games with rules, organized sports, inclusive of others

Playing games

- ★ Inclusive of everyone in the group
- ★ Encourage sharing of materials/interactions
- ★ When smaller games are being played, encourage campers to play games with each other (not with staff)



Conversation Starters

- ★ Connect campers with others who share the same interest
- ★ Find specific time for them to pursue that interest together
- ★ End of Day Group Meeting opportunities to share
- ★ Use conversation strategies at meals that get people talking about general subjects; Minimize “exclusion topics,” Role model how to listen, take turns talking



SCAFFOLDING SOCIAL SKILLS – TECHNIQUES FOR SUPPORT



- ★ Goal is to help children be seen in a positive light by peers
- ★ Campers with lagging social skills don't understand how their behavior affects the perspective of other campers
- ★ Teach campers that we all have expectations for how other people behave around/with us
- ★ Think of SCAFFOLDING as being a support – not a crutch
- ★ Idea is to support campers as they practice skills until they can do them on their own
- ★ “Pre-teach” what you want the camper to do (“Let's go up to Kevin and say hi!”)

FINAL THOUGHTS

Some kids are social butterflies; others might be better described as social awkward tacos. For youth struggling with lagging social skills, navigating the camp experience can be stressful, tiring and ostracizing (in other words, exactly the opposite of what the brochure told Mom it would be!) You don't have the staff ratio to hold each child's hand – literally – and get them through camp, but you can use several simple techniques to help build the basics of setting up children for social success. When you understand how social deficits can affect campers, you can then encourage friendship building, scaffold camper interactions, and help your awkward tacos get out of their own way and make friends at camp!

