

Next Steps and Action

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How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior

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- Jokes that made fun of Helen Keller's disabilities were very popular one summer at a camp run by a local social service agency.
- After the first week of the camp season, two girls were sent home. They were the only two black campers in a camp of one hundred white campers. The camp director said that they "weren't adjusting well," and that they wouldn't like it at that camp.

What do these incidents have in common? They're experiences I had during my years as a camper and staff member at a variety of camps. Name-calling, jokes, stereotyping, and discrimination against campers or staff are examples of ways that societal attitudes about particular groups of people are acted out as individual behaviors.

Prior to celebrating diversity, we must first eliminate intolerance. No matter what form it takes or who does it, we must all take action to stop intolerance when it happens. Working toward a celebration of diversity implies working for social justice—the elimination of all forms of social oppression.

Camps reflect the social injustice that is prevalent in North American society. Even though many camps are in idyllic physical settings away from the environmental problems of the cities, the social problems come to camp with the staff and campers. Social injustice takes many forms. It can be injustice based on a person's gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, or economic class.

While there are differences among forms of social injustice, there are also a number of commonalities. Some of those commonalities include a power differential between groups of people, the use of stereotyping to limit people, and the exclusion of the disempowered group.

In order to work for social justice in the world, we need to confront all forms of social injustice. What do we do when a camper tells a Helen Keller joke or a camp director excludes a camper based on his race? *First and foremost, it is important to confront the behavior.*

This chapter focuses on summer camp settings. However, the Action Continuum described within this chapter can be applied to many other contexts.

When I experience oppressive behavior, it is helpful for me to think about having a whole range of possible responses — what I think of as an *action continuum*.

In any situation, one can choose a range of actions—from participating in the oppressive behavior to working to prevent oppressive behavior on an organizational level.

Works Against Social Justice		Works Toward Social Justice				
Actively Join in Behavior	No Response	Educate Oneself	Interrupt the Behavior	Interrupt and Educate	Support Others' Proactive Response	Initiate Proactive Response

Now, let's apply the continuum to the incidents described at the beginning of the article.

Actions That Work against Social Justice

Actively Joining in the Oppressive Behavior

To actively join in oppressive behavior means doing something that supports the oppressive behavior rather than interrupting it.

Examples:

- laughing at the Helen Keller joke and sharing another of your own;
- saying, "I'm glad the director sent those girls home. This camp isn't for black people."

Having No Response:

Having no response means not responding to the behavior. Examples:

- not laughing at the joke;
- not saying something in response to the black campers being sent home.

Actions That Work toward Social Justice

Educating Yourself

To educate yourself means to learn more about what is behind the oppressive behavior. Examples:

- reading about the accomplishments of people with disabilities in the face of discrimination;
- reading about ways camps have been exclusive in the past and now welcome campers from a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Interrupting the Behavior

To interrupt the behavior means expressing your disapproval of the behavior. Possible responses:

- “I don’t think that joke is funny.”
- “I don’t think those campers should be sent home.”

Interrupt and Educate

To interrupt and educate means expressing your disapproval of the behavior *and* explaining what is oppressive about the behavior. Possible responses:

- “I don’t think jokes that make fun of someone’s disabilities are funny because they assume that someone with a disability is not worthy of respect.”
- “I don’t think it is appropriate to send the black girls home. People of color have a long history of being unfairly excluded from all-white organizations in this country. We should not perpetuate that exclusion.”

Supporting Others’ Proactive Responses

To support the proactive responses of others means supporting the efforts of other people to educate or take action that promotes understanding of differences. Examples:

- encouraging the campers who are telling jokes about Helen Keller to go to the campfire program that includes a puppet show about kids with disabilities;
- supporting the camp board of directors’ efforts to investigate ways to welcome campers and staff from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Initiating a Proactive Response

Initiating a proactive response means taking some kind of action that promotes understanding and valuing of cultural differences in camp settings. Examples:

- planning a series of events that focus on understanding and valuing people who have a wide range of abilities;
- organizing a seminar for the camp staff on working with campers from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Taking action to stop oppressive behavior can be difficult. It is easy to feel awkward or caught off guard. This action continuum can be used to think about different situations one might encounter. One can then mentally rehearse possible responses to situations that might occur. It also gives an individual the opportunity to choose an action that will be best suited to the situation and to the goal of promoting social justice.

Factors in deciding which response to make include the level of risk for yourself and others, your power in the situation, and your understanding of this form of social injustice. I recommend that you think about situations you have encountered and think about the range of possible responses you could have to each situation. You will then be better prepared the next time someone around you makes an oppressive comment or does something that creates a barrier to celebrating diversity. This action continuum can also be used during staff training as the basis for a discussion on dealing with oppressive behavior.

If everyone makes a commitment to respond appropriately to oppressive behavior, the ground work will be laid for creating settings in which diversity is truly celebrated.