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# The **PRESSURE** to Be **POPULAR** **THE BEST** **FUNNY** **Perfect** **liked** **THE SMARTEST** **good at everything** **The Winner** **Successful**

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Now more than ever, our youth struggle with pressures to succeed. We are seeing a more competitive group of kids than ever before. This “cut throat” generation strives to be the “best” – the best athlete, dancer, student, etc. As we know, TV is inundated with competitive shows like Survivor, Top Chef, Dancing with the Stars, and the Apprentice that glorify winning at any cost. We all know these kids are under tremendous pressure to get into colleges. Even as early as elementary school, children are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities designed to build their credentials for getting into the best colleges. While

they receive pressure from parents to be successful, according to a recent study from Stanford University “today’s children face tough prospects of being better off than their parents.” All of this pressure may come with a price for many of our youth.

As the camp season is about to begin, it is helpful for us to consider what kids are thinking about today. Kids are thinking about college as early as elementary school and are expected to know “what they want to be when they grow up” at a much earlier age than ever before. Although a certain amount of competitiveness and desire

to achieve are undoubtedly healthy, it is likely that too much can lead to difficulties. The need to succeed at such a high level is likely to contribute to an increase in anxiety for many of our youth. “Will I get into a top school?” “How will my family pay for increasing costs?” “Will I make the team or club?” “What will happen if I don’t?” As a therapist, my colleagues and I are seeing peer relationships affected by these pressures as well. Peers seem to be less supportive of each other and more concerned about themselves than with considering the thoughts and feelings of others. Loyalty among friends may not mean as much as it has in the past.

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*The PRESSURE to be...(continued)*

In the past month a Long Island female high school teen and a New Jersey camp group leader committed suicide. Although these pressures on youths may seem obvious to some, we should not underestimate them. Therapists are seeing more young people for whom pressures and competitiveness appear to be associated with depression, eating disorders, drug abuse and suicide.

Camp is a place where friendship, supportiveness and unity are emphasized. It is a place that recognizes and supports the growth of lifelong friendships. Following often extremely stressful school years, camp can and should be a safe haven in which to relax and enjoy friends. At the same time, many camps are competitive in nature. Healthy competition is what often makes a successful camp summer. Incorporating the idea that “being your best” or “giving it your all” is helpful. It is the balance we need to strive towards. While this still encourages a spirit of competition, it balances that with the importance of supporting the self-esteem of all our children.

So, what can a camp do to address this challenge? First, let’s continue to assure that our staff are sensitive to the problem and are trained to work together to create an atmosphere of teamwork and cooperation. Second, camps can review their activities and look for opportunities to emphasize team building and collaboration. Third, camps can consider incorporating more “integrative teamwork” and group skill building into their activities and sports programs. Many businesses have adopted cooperative team games like “escape the room” that encourage better communication and productivity – and are fun to play as well. A quick web search will turn up thousands of integrative teambuilding games for youth. For example, one I like is a simple game called the “human knot” that has everyone in a small group stand in a tight circle, place their hands and arms into the center, and grab the hand or arm of someone else – then they have to figure out “untangle” the knot without letting go. It’s a bit like a massive game of Twister. These types of games can be lots of fun. They are both physically

and mentally challenging. But they also promote cooperation and encourage team spirit. Finally, even in competitive sports many camps realize it’s important not just to award the winners but to recognize good skills, sportsmanship, effort and improvement as well.

**As camp directors and staff we have the opportunity to lower the pressure bar of competitiveness and raise the bar of teamwork and collaboration. As a modern society we sometimes forget that we also need pressure to be... the best person we can possibly be and a good team player. As camp staff, we can provide reassurance, emotional safety, and team-building opportunities, as well as encourage a balance of individual growth and competition with others.**



For additional resources for team-building activities, see:

<http://www.ultimatecampresource.com/site/camp-activities/cooperative-games.page-1.html>

<https://www.pinterest.com/jadevoe/team-building-cooperative-games/>

<http://youthgroupgames.com.au/team-building-activities/>