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Battling back against bullying

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METRO CANADA

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A dream summer camp can quickly turn into a nightmare for a child who falls victim to a bully.

The intimidation and isolation that is bad enough if it happens at school is magnified when the child is away from her support network of family and friends. Experts say how bullying is handled can make the difference between a lost summer and a learning experience.

Dr. Christopher Thurber is a clinical psychologist with more than 30 years of experience at summer camps. He's appeared on the Today Show, the CBS Morning News and PBS.

He shared his philosophy on handling bullies from his office in Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, where he works as a school psychologist.

The first line of defence is how parents prepare kids for camp. Educate them to be assertive and resist mistreatment, he says. That can block bullying, as well as other unwanted attention or abuse.

"Teach kids to ask the person to stop," he says. That also applies if the child witnesses someone else being bullied.

"Be an upstander, not a bystander," Thurber says. "Kids need to be educated that such behaviour is much less likely to continue if they step in on behalf of their friends."

Instruct children to tell a counsellor so the bullying can be nipped in the bud. Kids may worry about being labelled a tattletale, so they need to know when it's appropriate to seek adult help.

Parents should talk to the camp director to ask how they have dealt with past incidents of bullying.

"A lot of parents think they want to hear the camp director say, 'We have a zero-tolerance policy.'

But research suggests that those (policies) are not helpful," he says.

"The problem with the zero-tolerance policy is that it doesn't teach anybody – the bully or the target or the onlookers – how to respond the next time. In almost all cases, (bullying) is a misguided attempt at social connection."

If the bullying is violent, say involving a weapon, then zero tolerance should apply, Thurber says, but otherwise the camp should help the bully learn to seek those connections in healthier ways and teach the victim and witnesses how to stand up and stop bullying.

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Summer camps provide 'spark' for many kids



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