Hazing and Bullying: Identifying the Signs

Today’s note was created with a contribution from Dr. Carrie Hastings, Psy. D. Carrie is a trainer and research specialist for Play Like a Champion Today. She obtained her master’s and doctoral degrees in clinical psychology at Pepperdine University, where she is part of the adjunct faculty. She presents nationally on the topic of bullying and was a speaker at our Leadership Conference this past summer.

At least 48% of high schoolers experience hazing, while 80% of college athletes report having been hazed. Many athletes relish the memories associated with team bonding rituals...so what’s the big deal?

Initiation rituals aren’t automatically a bad thing. Traditions such as making the rookies carry the balls or doing community service as a team are common and typically considered harmless, or even helpful. These types of activities can build camaraderie and cohesiveness, and infuse humor into new relationships. However, teams must guard against activities devolving into unwelcome, cruel, dangerous, or criminal behavior. Such behavior should never be tolerated and must be reported to the proper authorities immediately.

There is a fine line between harmless initiations that encourage bonding and harmful hazing that ostracizes and demeans victims. Team veterans are not always aware that they are jeopardizing the emotional well-being of a fellow athlete. This is the “hidden harm” of hazing. It is often hard to know what statements or actions will negatively impact those involved. Mental health issues and past traumatic experiences can also have a profound impact on individuals. Hazing rituals can re-awaken memories that have been buried or unaddressed. In other words, you don’t know what will break someone, so it is best to avoid placing individuals in stressful situations that could trigger emotional turmoil.

Hazing is a form of bullying, even if the perpetrators “don’t mean harm.” The difference is that bullying is about exclusion, while hazing is about inclusion. Hazing occurs in the context of being new to a team or group, and typically involves a structured, planned event meant to humiliate, degrade, or endanger a newbie, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate. Rookies often acquiesce to mistreatment as they are seeking acceptance and approval, while older teammates may go along with the rituals because they also want to belong.

Hazing and bullying can result in the recipient feeling anxious, sad or depressed, angry, fearful, isolated, and self-conscious. Victims may find it hard to trust others and can develop a fear of connecting with anyone. Thus, because they find it safer to be alone, they may withdraw from the team. This can manifest through expression of physical symptoms that keep them from participating in games or practice. The individual may also show decreased interest in the sport, and spend minimal time in the locker room.

Upon noticing red flags, parents should speak with their children in a sensitive manner. Use of the terms “bullying” and “hazing” can trigger defensiveness, so focus on concerns surrounding the issue when opening dialogue. For example, ask about your child’s friendships on the team, interpersonal respect among teammates, and rites of passage expected of newcomers. Remember that the impact of hazing can vary based on the individual. It can be helpful to seek confidential advice from a counselor, social worker, or other child care professional to help guide you and your child to the appropriate next steps.

We understand that bullying and hazing are sensitive topics that can often seem difficult to navigate. If you have any questions or need other information, please feel free to contact askdoctorcarrie@nd.edu.

Reflection Questions:

- Are harmful hazing practices embedded into my child’s team traditions?
- What consequences and solutions should be discussed with the coach and athletic director?
  - Zero tolerance?
  - Probation?
  - End the season?
- Can my child and I distinguish between harmful team practices, innocuous teasing, and accidents?

Did you know…?

42 states now have anti-hazing laws, with the exception of:

- Arizona
- Alaska
- Hawaii
- Montana
- Michigan
- South Dakota
- Vermont
- Wyoming

For more information:

- stopbullying.gov
- stompoutharming.org
- hazingprevention.org
- stophazing.org
- pinterest.com/plact/bullying-hazing

"Knowing what’s right doesn’t mean much unless you do what’s right.”

Theodore Roosevelt

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