

Group Building and Challenge Activities

Every camp is different with a variety of challenge course and group recreation tools available. This section is provided to help you apply the principles and practices we apply in low and high ropes course work, even if it is expressed in a simple, grounded, activity.

Name Ball

Best with Day 1

Why: Group building and name memory are important early in any week of camp.

Supplies: Two different colored lightweight balls and a mid-sized open area. Works best with groups of 10–15 people.

How: Group stands in a circle, facing in, with space between each person for tossing a ball. Each person learns the name of the player on their left and right. Hand one of the balls to a player and instruct them to pass the “Right Ball” to the person on their right after/while calling out their name. Let the “Right Ball” pass around the circle a couple of times, then remove it. Repeat this process with the other colored “Left Ball,” except reverse the direction of passing. Now have everyone scramble around the circle and find a new spot where they are not directly next to either of their original partners. Put the “Right Ball” into play. Players must locate the person who used to be on their right, call out their name and toss them the ball. When the passing is well along, add the “Left Ball.” For a higher level of challenge, additional “Left” and “Right” balls may be added. Make sure all “Left” and “Right” balls match in color.

BTW: For a bit of fun, add in a rubber chicken or other colored throwing object, which can only be passed to people who were NOT on your right or left in the original group, though you still must call out names.

What’s Your Part?

Best with Day 2

Why: Gets people sharing about their story and invites others to make connections.

Supplies: One length of rope/cord, 15 to 16 feet long, tied in a circle, for each group

How: Start with everyone holding on to the rope with both hands. Participants move people around so that the rope forms the outline of various body parts. You can let one person select a part, then lead them, or you can assign the parts and see if the group can form it together.

BTW: Encourage people to stay connected to the rope as they create the map for each person’s story. This helps group members feel connected to the story/place, even if they have never been there.

Trust Rope Activity

Best with Day 2

Why: Build a community of trust in a safe, fun way. This challenge has a gradual progression to it, modeling that trust building is a process rather than an event.

Supplies: One rope or webbing tied in a loop, 15-16 feet long. This rope will be holding the weight of your whole group, so it needs to be strong. Activity needs to be in a level, obstacle-free space.

How: Invite the group members to grasp the rope with their hands and feet about shoulder width apart. Then invite the group to lean back slightly and balance the circle. Then reset; a “1, 2, 3, Up” command works well for this. Trust is built on the experience of past actions; therefore, it is necessary to reset often. As you add in more steps, keep resetting, and the trust and excitement levels will continue to grow because each reset feels like a win for the group. Next, have the group lean back, balance the circle, and then take a couple steps forward. Reset. Have the group lean back, balance the circle, take a couple steps forward,

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and then rotate one way or the other. Reset. Do a longer rotation with a direction switch before resetting.

The final challenge is more difficult with younger campers. If you've reset often, you will have built up enough "wins" that the group can be allowed to struggle a bit with this last challenge. It is best to ask the campers if they feel ready for a higher challenge. Have the group lean back, balance the circle, and then slowly bend their knees, lowering the group almost to a sitting position, then slowly raise back up.

BTW: The final challenge feels awesome, so feel free to do it a couple of times! You can also revisit this activity later in the week to refocus the group back on community and unity.

Blindfold High Ropes

Best with Day 2 and 3

Why: High ropes activities impose a challenge or conflict on the individual. In the context of community and responding to conflict, encouragement and support from the community is very important for overcoming obstacles.

Supplies: High ropes course and blindfolds

How: Check with whoever oversees the high ropes course for safety considerations. Blindfold the high ropes participants so that the community must communicate and give support for there to be success. If your course can accommodate two participants at the same time, consider having one person blindfolded and the other not, so the partners must climb or traverse together.

BTW: If a participant is struggling with having everyone giving instructions, consider designating one person as the helper for them.

Bowl Full of Water

Best with Day 3

Why: Help participants accept responsibility for their part in a conflict.

Supplies: Bowl full of water, towel

How: Recruit a volunteer, place the towel over their shoulder, then hand them the bowl full of water and ask them to hold it so the water doesn't slosh out. Give them a few seconds, then gently tap or shake their arm so water sloshes everywhere. Ask the group, "Why did the water spill on the ground?" The answers will typically range from, "because you pushed him," to "because you're a jerk." Then challenge them with this question, "If the bowl had been filled with popcorn, would it have spilled?" The obvious answer is, no, popcorn would not have spilled on the ground. So then, re-ask your original question, "Why did Andy spill water on the ground?" The idea you are trying to guide them toward is, "Because there was water in the bowl." In a conflict, we are quick to put all the blame on the other person: "He made me angry." In order for there to be *shalom*, a restoration of relationship, we must accept responsibility for our part in the conflict: "You pushed me, and I responded in anger," or "The anger was already there, and your pushing me merely 'shook the bowl.'" Invite the campers to try to figure out how the volunteer could have done something different to have created a different outcome. The solution is wrapping the towel around the bowl, pulling it tight across the top. Ask campers how being honest about the emotions and issues within us might impact our approach to conflict.

BTW: If you have time, walk through this process with multiple emotions, brainstorming cause and response scenarios with the campers. For example: "Your friend's new toy didn't make you jealous; the jealousy was already there. Your friend's new toy just shook the bowl." Other possibilities include bitterness, lust, or impatience. All lead to conflict and must be addressed to achieve *shalom*.

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Helium Bar

Best with Day 5 or 6

Why: Practicing peace over competition. Achievement comes through working together.

Supplies: A thin, lightweight pole, 8-10 feet long, for each group of 10-15. A collapsible pole from an old tent or a dowel rod works great. It could also be done with a hula hoop with the group in a circle.

How: Have the group line up in two rows facing each other. Ask participants to point their index fingers and hold their arms out about chest height, then lay the “Helium Bar” over the outstretched fingers. Every team member must keep both index fingers in constant contact with the Helium Bar at all times. If anyone loses contact, the team must start over at chest height again (enforce this at your discretion, especially with younger kids). The Helium Bar can only be resting on the index fingers. Pinching or grabbing the pole is not allowed—it must rest on top of fingers. The goal is to lower the bar to the ground.

Once the teams begin to touch the Helium Bar, the challenge will present itself rather quickly. The bar is so light that the up-force from each of the fingers trying to stay in contact is greater than the weight of the bar. The result? Immediately, the stick will begin to rise. Some participants will try to coach the others by giving verbal instructions like, “No, go down!” When that doesn’t work, they usually get more vocal (because the problem is that everyone just isn’t listening to the leader, right?), and they will shout, “Down! Down! Down!” After they struggle a while, take a break and ask the team to form a plan based on their experience. Eventually, the group will start to figure out the secret to getting the activity to work.

This is a fantastic team-building game that will let you draw lots of conclusions about verbal vs. nonverbal communication, the difference between loud, vocal “leaders” and those who lead by example, and more. Have fun with this team-building activity!

BTW: Less often, a group may appear to be succeeding too fast. In response, be particularly vigilant about fingers not touching the pole. Leader Hint: Synchronization is key. If they group is struggling, you can suggest they chant together something like “1, 2, 3, Down. 1, 2, ...” to coordinate their efforts.

Marble Movers

Best with Day 5

Why: Using cooperation instead of competition to solve problems.

Supplies: For each group member: a “Marble Mover” (a 3-foot-long dowel rod with a plastic spoon taped on the end) and a mid-size cup; one Frisbee or Frisbee-like container (something with a low lip edge) for the group, filled with four or five marbles for each player.

How: Place the container of marbles on the ground or floor. Have the participants sit in a circle at a distance where they can just reach the container with their Marble Movers. Have everyone place their cup next to the hip of the same side as the hand they will be holding the Marble Mover with (i.e., if they are using their left hand, the cup goes by their left hip). Tell the group, “The goal is for each person to get as many marbles as they can in their cup. Marble Movers must be held at the end of the stick, with only one hand. The task is complete when all the marbles in the container are gone.”

It will be very difficult, if not impossible, for each player to drop marbles in their own cups. But they will surely try. Eventually the group will figure out that they need to cooperate and place marbles in the cups of other people.

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BTW: For most groups it is likely best to ensure there are an equal number of marbles for everyone (but don't tell them this at the beginning; let them figure out the cooperation tactic on their own!). However, for an older group, you may consider purposefully putting in an unequal amount of marbles to see how the group handles it and draw out topics of inequality, justice, fairness, etc.

Share My Journey

Best with Day 6

Why: Active peacemaking requires that we follow the example of the Good Samaritan and go out of our way to share in the journey of others. This activity helps us learn to do this.

Supplies: One section of rope/cord/tape about 15–20 feet long

How: Place the rope/cord/tape on the ground to represent a timeline. Based on the experiences of the group up to this point, you may decide to have the line represent a person's whole life, their time at camp, the next five years, etc. The members of the group walk together along the line while one person shares their experience of the predetermined timeline. The person sharing sets the pace with everyone else walking alongside them, sharing the journey together. At the end of the rope, the group turns around and repeats the process with the next person. You may consider adding a zig-zag or bend in the rope to visually represent life moments that didn't go according to plan.

BTW: This is a very "safe" activity for campers who are shy or reluctant to share in group. Everyone is walking side-by-side rather than staring at the speaker, and the speaker has control over how long they share by walking slower or faster.