

# There Is a Reason! Understanding Challenging Behavior

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## There Is a Reason! Understanding Challenging Behavior

Scott Arizala

I once worked with cat. Not a “meow” cat, although that’s how she identified herself to me. She was a thirteen-year-old girl who insisted she was a cat. You can imagine how hard it was for her at summer camp, in a cabin full of very typical thirteen-year-old girls, being anything but typical (meow). As I worked through the various expressions of her cat-ness – complaints about the food, the bathroom, the waterfront, the lack of a scratching pole, etc. – it became pretty clear that she felt different and she didn’t know how to express it in any other way. So she was a cat.

Cat Girl is a good example of challenging camper behavior that can be a source of major issues for camp counselors. Whether it is campers who are defiant, disruptive, contrary, disrespectful, manipulative, annoying, socially inept, or even seem mean spirited, the great majority of challenging behavior is relatively mild, yet consistent, and doesn’t seem to have a rationale or logic. It’s hard to figure out and frustrating because “nothing works” and most counselors “try everything” with kids like this.

### Why Do They Do What They Do?

We all make choices that directly affect how we relate and connect to those around us. Whether it is who you sit next to at lunch, who you friend on Facebook, the classes you decide to take, or even the clothes you picked for today, the choices we make and the behavior we exhibit directly affect how we relate to others. Sometimes we do things to be the center of attention; other times it is to create separation and difference; still other times it might be to try and connect or relate even when we don’t know how (meow). I think at their core, kids understand this principle. They may express their various needs in different ways, but whether they are boys, girls, older, younger, social, loners, typical, or atypical, they all understand that what they do directly affects their relationship with others.

Since most kids follow a pattern or cycle regarding their behavior, we can break this cycle down to prevent some negative behavior from happening and intervene when it does.

#### Step 1: Am I Cool?

It happens all the time, like clockwork. Kids, adults, teens, professionals – just about everyone – enter a situation and map out the social landscape: who knows whom; who is with whom; who is alone; who belongs; who looks like they know what they are doing; and most importantly, how do I fit in? Another way to ask that is, “Am I cool?” That is not how most adults would say it, but creating community and a sense of belonging and developing a network are basically the same thing as working on being cool. I make this point about adults because it is powerful and ultimately necessary to identify with the issues and challenges that campers have if we hope to help guide their behavior and choices when dealing with their issues. Recognizing that we all struggle with this allows us to empathize with what the camper is feeling and to help them find solutions.

#### Step 2: Freak Out

Insecurity is an emotion that everyone shares. We are all insecure about something. Some things that campers are typically insecure about we know, like their perceived ability at an activity, their clothes, whether they will have friends, their body, and their family. Other things we really would have no idea about unless they tell us, like how well they did during the school year, how their parents’ marriage is doing, or if there has been a recent death in the immediate family. And still others no one may know about, like an undiagnosed disability or child abuse. The point is that we all have insecurities and these insecurities are what drive us to action. Sometimes it is a mild insecurity – like feeling a little anxious on opening day. Other times it is a more significant insecurity – like feeling desperately homesick because your parents are separating while you are at camp. It is these insecurities that motivate or necessitate action, choices, or behavior.

#### Step 3: Action

Coping strategies and skills are simply the way we deal with our own little freak outs. Sometimes we talk, ask questions, and engage; other times we withdraw and stick to ourselves. Sometimes our coping strategies are normal and healthy – like when campers try to engage other kids in activities at which they excel. Other times our techniques are clumsy, off-putting, violent, or socially awkward (meow). This behavior is a direct result from feeling insecure, unconnected, and frankly, not that cool.

The trick to understanding kids and their behavior is to know that there is a reason they are doing whatever it is that they are doing. Their actions may not be healthy or typical, but there is some reason and rationale behind it.

## Prevention and Intervention

Armed with this basic understanding, it is now possible to use this behavior cycle to develop unique prevention and intervention strategies for challenging behavior as well as for guiding and encouraging positive behavior. In other words, you'll be able to see more clearly how to help your campers do more of what's right and less of what's not.

There are three basic parts of the cycle that you can manipulate. We know kids struggle to connect (*am I cool?*); we know that kids will have some insecurities (*freak out*); and we know that they will try and deal with those insecurities through behavior (*action*) — which, by the way, acts as a way to connect, distance, or otherwise reconfigure the social map (back to *am I cool?*).

**Am I cool?** If we know they are all asking that basic question and that they will struggle with it, we can work hard at making sure every camper feels safe and connected. There are lots of things you already do at camp that fit into this idea. I think the most important thing to remember is that you are ultimately the coolest person on earth to your campers. Knowing this, the more individual attention you can give to everyone, the better. Each camper will feel connected to you and you can model proper ways to engage with others. Think about this when doing things like get-to-know-you games or icebreakers on opening day. You want everyone to know each other's names and feel more comfortable with each other so that each kid finds different and unique connections within a group. You could work on creating a secret name or mission for your group or cabin, or give them group responsibilities. Both will help the group create a strong identity and more possible connections. These strategies and many more help kids feel the sense of belonging that might minimize their freak outs.

**The freak out.** In the words of the former US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, "There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are things we know we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know." Brilliant! Although I'm not sure he knew he was talking about campers' fears and insecurities.

Campers' insecurities fall into all the categories. Since we really don't have super powers at camp, let's forgo the "unknown unknowns" category for now and focus on what we do know about the insecurities campers have, and what we know we may not know. If we know they are going to feel insecure about having friends, being in a new environment with a new routine, whether or not they are good at the activities, and what they look like (just to name a few), what can we do to prevent or minimize the impact of these insecurities on their behavior?

Among the many strategies, one of the most important is to pay attention to process and procedure. We have to respect that at summer camp we do things that are really different from anywhere else kids find themselves. Think about what it is like for kids in just the first few hours at camp. Singing songs, playing games, making up new names for yourself, and meeting a whole group of new friends with whom you are going to live or spend your entire day — and doing all of this before you know where to go to the bathroom or where to eat. While this is fun and exciting, it can also be jarring and terrifying. If we can pay close attention to how we are explicit about our expectations of the camp processes and procedures, we can minimize some of the effects of insecurities. This can be as simple as giving kids a daily schedule. That often gives them a sense of what to expect and how to negotiate it — in other words, control. Examples of other techniques are being intentional about different pairings and match-ups for games, playing plenty of non-competitive games and activities, and even offering lots of different choices within each activity. All of these techniques help campers make more connections and have a greater opportunity for success, which will in turn minimize the impact of insecurity.

What about "known unknowns"? We know we don't know about their family history, their current home environment, their success at school, or their social network. So we have to employ all the great camp counselor skills necessary to create relationships with kids (often quickly, as most of us only get kids for one week). We need to ask good questions (open-ended), listen carefully, stay interested and engaged, participate in the activities with energy, and react fairly and consistently to both positive and negative behavior. Each of these helps to build trust and create a more meaningful relationship between the staff and campers. When campers are in a safe environment in which they have a trusting relationship with positive adults, it will minimize the negative effects of insecurities and fears. In other words, they won't freak out as much, and they will make better choices.

**Action.** The first part of using action or coping skills to help guide campers' behavior is actually not about the campers at all — it's about us. When we are trying to prevent insecurities and fears from developing into unhealthy coping strategies (meow) or intervene when we see really negative or maladaptive behavior (meow), the first step is for us as the adults to see the behavior for what it actually is — a coping strategy. The camper is trying to cope, although it might not be working and it might be really negative, like bullying or being violent. But we must remember it IS a coping strategy based on some insecurity, and its intention is to try and make a connection (being cool). Recognizing this may be the single hardest thing to do when it comes to kids and their behavior.

Once we recognize that behavior and choices are an action toward connection, then we can help guide the behavior into more adaptive places. We can help these campers get what they want. First, teach to the undeveloped skill. One of Cat Girl's many undeveloped skills was creating interpersonal relationships. She didn't know how to relate and connect to other kids. So she did what made sense to her, she made herself as different as possible (meow), and in turn actually created a connection. Albeit uncomfortable, unhealthy, and based on being socially ostracized, it was still a connection. She had created a social space for herself. So the staff in her case really needed to work hard at creating more adaptive and healthy connections. They needed to teach her how to connect, by engaging other kids in activities and having a conversation where you pay attention to what the other person is saying and ask follow-up questions. Simple, but very effective stuff.

Another way to prevent and intervene with negative behavior is specific and process-oriented praise. Praise the process, not the product. At camp, do we care if a kid gets a bulls-eye at archery or if their art project is done "correctly?" Nope. We care about the process of getting there. Did he try something new? Did she keep trying over and over? Did he have fun doing it? These are all questions that pinpoint the process, and that is where we need to praise. When we do this, campers feel good about themselves and their behavior and are more apt to repeat it. Again, it's a simple but powerful behavior management technique.

Other ideas to help are offering a variety of choices, being flexible with plans and activities, and redirecting energy and focus. Each helps campers feel more in control of their behavior and the outcomes or consequences.

## Strategies and Framework

Essentially, all of this is cyclical and will lead campers back to creating stronger and better connections with everyone around them — you included (am I cool?). By understanding this cycle, we have an opportunity to be more proactive in creating an environment in which kids thrive and develop lasting and meaningful relationships. We also can have a better understanding of why they do what they do. Anybody that has ever been a camp counselor has muttered words like, "Really?!" or "Wait, what just happened?!" at times when the behavior and choices of a camper or group of campers seemed bizarre at best (meow). These strategies and this framework will help you navigate the sometimes strange behaviors of your campers and help you develop unique and creative approaches to work with them.

*"I couldn't make that quote up if I tried. Quoted from a February 12, 2002 press briefing on the Iraq War. Watch the video at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiPe10iKQuk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiPe10iKQuk) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiPe10iKQuk>)*

## Discussion Questions

How do harder-to-understand behaviors like bullying, homesickness, or withdrawal fit into the cycle of behavior described by the author?

Getting kids to create connections is one of the major take aways of this article. What are some ways not mentioned that you can help kids establish great connections with others at camp?

One idea that this article infers is that staff members have to act consistently when dealing with negative or positive behavior. How can we help our co-workers be more consistent when dealing with individual campers?

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