

“The dog is dead.” Wrigley, the new camp puppy, drowned during the firework show the previous night, and it was now my job to tell 60 eight-year-old campers what had happened. You see, this past summer, I worked as a division leader at Camp Champions.

While the rest of my friends were getting internships in the corporate world, I was gaining hands-on leadership experience in the camp setting. I oversaw the youngest and largest division of campers, managed their 12 counselors, held daily congruency meetings, spoke to concerned parents, and planned events for over 500 people; those were my official duties. Additionally, I led water gun attacks, went slip-n-sliding, and built fires. I washed pee-soaked sheets, helped kids cope with homesickness, and now it was my job to inform them that the dog had died. Needless to say, I was not looking forward to it.

Before I went to tell the kids, I held an emergency meeting with all of the counselors in my division and instructed them on the best way to handle the situation. I had to make sure that my team would remain strong for the kids while putting aside their own feelings of loss. My job as division leader mandated me to be there for the counselors just as they were to be there for their campers.

After this meeting, the bell for the third activity rang, and I ventured to the pool where all 60 campers were gathered for swim lessons. Before I could sit them all down and talk them through the news, I could tell that several had already heard rumors of what had happened. The kids did not look sad, as much as they looked confused. It was then that I realized that many (if not most) of these kids had never encountered loss before, which made my job that much more critical. One thing I have learned is the importance of framing, taking a situation and phrasing it in a way that can produce a positive outcome. I had to frame this situation in a way that allowed them to acknowledge and understand the loss, while not hindering their overall camp experience.

The first thing I did was tell them the truth, while assuring them that everything was going to be alright. I had to convey to them that I was in control of the situation, while at the same time give them the same compassion that their parents would give them if the situation had happened at home. The loss of this dog would undoubtedly bring to mind their own pets at home, so next I had to let them know that their own animals were happy and healthy. I ended my talk by framing the situation and giving them a special purpose that would help the community as a whole. To do this, I explained to them that the dog belonged to the owners of the camp (Steve and Susie) and that the news was especially hard on them. I then asked them to stay strong for Susie and hug her when they saw her.

They learned it was truly normal to be sad, but at the same time, they had a higher purpose for the day. After my talk with them, some left immediately to go on the water slides while others stayed behind and asked questions about what had happened. They were sad, as expected, but then recovered remarkably fast. Throughout the day, I saw them hugging Susie, comforting her for her loss. It is truly amazing what such young children are capable of comprehending. On the one hand, they have short attention spans and love to make jokes about bodily functions, while on the other, they can begin to process loss and take it upon themselves to make someone else’s day better.

This was probably the most difficult thing I had to do while working at camp this summer, but it was also the most valuable. I dreaded breaking this news to the children but knew that it was my responsibility to do so. It taught me how to take control of a negative situation instead of letting it take control of me. I learned the necessity of controlling my emotions when others are looking to me for guidance. While

doing so, I devised a plan of action, coordinated with the counselors working in my division, and followed through with that plan of action.

Moreover, I learned the power of language. When dealing with a subject like this, I had to carefully choose every word. I knew that if I did not handle the situation properly, their entire camp experience could have been ruined. I understood what my audience was feeling and carefully catered everything I said to them. I learned to present facts in a way that benefited all parties and to handle certain situations with extreme care. By framing the situation in a way that empowered them to do good, I made the loss bearable. While my friends filled out paperwork all summer, I learned these types of lessons. And I am grateful for every minute of it.