

# *Principles for Conducting Healing Camps*

## Introduction

A Healing Camp is an event in the format of a camp or retreat that is specifically designed to offer a chance for healing to a group of children, youth or adults who have experienced a common trauma. The model emerged from a series of camps offered to children from the Westside Middle School after their school shooting. Those camps grew to include students from other sites including Columbine, Paducah (KY), Edinboro (PA), and then to students who had experienced trauma more generally -- NYC youth after 9/11, children who lost parents, youth who experienced protracted civil war in Bosnia. Over the course of five years, eight camps/retreats were provided and many of the participants and parents relate that those camps were very effective in helping them heal.

Looking back at those camps and talking with survivors of school shootings, a set of principles is emerging to serve as a guide for organizing other Healing Camps. There is also an emerging network of survivors, people who conducted the Westside/Connection camps, and people with experience in disaster response. There was an initial gathering of these people at a Responding to School Violence Conference sponsored by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and conducted at Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center (Little Rock) in April 2015. What follows is an emerging set of guiding principles for the Healing Camp model.

Principles of a “Certified Healing Camp Program”  
5/15/15      David Gill, Laurie Kraus, Brian Frick

### 1. Discernment

- A Healing Camp is something to offer only if you and your camp/conference center sense a calling to this ministry. It will not work as just another camp offering, an opportunity to fill a calendar slot, or a chance to gain visibility. It will take a significant commitment of time and heart. You will be entering holy ground and committing to care for very vulnerable people. Be prepared to make a long term commitment should the initial camp go well but do not make commitments you are not prepared and equipped to keep.
- A significant portion of someone’s time will need to be devoted to this project. The leader and leadership team for this camp will need freedom to make decisions without the delays of waiting for layers of approval.
- One of the biggest hurdles can be getting the offer of the Healing Camp to the right people for consideration. Remember, the school officials and

community have been traumatized. Work with them and not against them. Be prepared to be persistent.

- PDA, if they responded to the event, will be a valuable resource in determining the right person(s) to contact.

## 2. Local Connections

- Look for a local pastor(s) or caregiver(s) that has a connection to the children/community/school and can be part of the camp.
- Make every effort to find a parent or teacher from the school who can serve on a planning team even if they cannot do many face-to-face meetings.
- If possible, conduct registration and provide transportation from the school/community.

## 3. Collaboration

- Include someone who has already run a Healing Camp, PDA, and the Office of Camp and Conference Ministry (OCCM) in the planning and executing of a Healing Camp.
- One or more of your staff need to have participated in a \*Certified Healing Camp Training.”
- Have a nurse and therapist – one who can relate well to this age group -- on grounds 24/7 during the camp.
- Inform and engage your Presbytery or Synod throughout the process.
- Have Presbytery/Synod endorse the Camp/Conference Center as a site for Certified Healing Camps.

## 4. Safe Environment

- A policy for dealing with the media, social media and personal communication devices must be spelled out and communicated to all who will be involved.
- It has been our experience that survivors are very sensitive about public media and have felt abused and intruded upon by them. Be cautious about media involvement and very transparent about it to participants.
- If trained summer staff are serving as the primary caregivers (recommended), find time for a half day of additional training to give them confidence and context. Certified Healing Camps will provide trauma-informed care training for all staff engaged in leading healing camps. If other staff are used, they need to receive training in privacy, sexual harassment and abuse in addition to other core components such as age group characteristics, briefing by therapist or PDA leader in what to expect in behavior and mental state of campers.

## 5. Well-Developed Structure

- From registration to closing, the event/camp needs to be thoroughly and thoughtfully structured. Children want to have fun. The powerful therapeutic effects of Healing Camps come by taking traditional camp activities (art, recreation, small group discussions, worship, music, etc., and tweaking them to make them all the more meaningful to these campers.
- Competent, caring, college age staff are key. “If you have not love...” Have a program, structure and support staff so that the counselors can focus on the campers.
- A significant part of the healing is giving the survivors time to be together. They will have a bond that doesn’t need words to communicate.
- Have a low ratio of campers to staff. (like 3 or 4 campers to 1 summer staff cabin counselor).

## 6. Faith Content

- Having a faith/worship component is an important part of the healing.
- Ritual –religious and otherwise--provides safe and holy space for processing deep feelings and helping to integrate the campers’ trauma in a healing way.
- It should be provided in a manner that is respectful of other faith traditions and of those who are not believers.

## 7. Review and Best Practices

Certified Healing Camps agree to conduct a comprehensive self evaluation following any Healing Camp and share the results with other Certified Healing Camps. Additionally, camps agree to participate in a review with the Healing Camps Coordinating Group to evaluate, capture new learnings and best practices and maintain the consistency of the healing camp model.

\*Comparable training may be arranged by PDA for camps that have not yet become a Certified Healing Camp through participating in a Certified Healing Camp Training.