

What is hazing?

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Definition of Hazing: The National Federation defines hazing as any humiliating or dangerous activity expected of a student to belong to a group, regardless of their willingness to participate.

Some practices associated with high school hazing carry the potential for serious bodily harm or even death. These practices may include: tattooing, piercing, head-shaving, branding, sleep deprivation, physical punishment (paddling and "red-bellying"), "kidnapping," consuming unreasonable/unacceptable foods or beverages, being deprived of personal hygiene and/or inappropriate sexual behavior.

Coerced sexual activity, in addition to being classified as sexual assault and/or rape, is another form of hazing. Such activity puts victims at risk for injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy.

Alcohol abuse is another significant factor in hazing incidents that feature forced consumption of large amounts of alcohol.

Prevalence of hazing among high school students

Initiation Rites in American High Schools, a study by Alfred University revealed that 48 percent of students who belong to groups reported being subjected to hazing activities. Forty-three percent reported being subjected to humiliating activities and 30 percent reported performing potentially illegal acts as part of their initiation.

Studies suggest that close to 1.5 million high school students have been subjected to some form of hazing. A notable number of students responding to the Alfred University survey reported that their first hazing experience occurred before the age of 13.

For more information from the Alfred University report, visit their website at:

http://www.alfred.edu/hs_hazing/

Hazing

Like domestic violence victims, victims of hazing may hide the true cause of their injuries. Anyone working with those who may be hazing victims should assure them that they are safe and protected from possible retribution. Some risk factors to bear in mind are: age, participation in athletic or military activities, and involvement of alcohol use.

A student who is being hazed may exhibit excessive fatigue, appear disheveled, or wear odd clothing. They may isolate themselves from friends and family, skip/miss classes due to lack of sleep at night, and/or feel depressed.

If you hear about "hell week" or even the innocent sounding, "help week" or "initiation," it may be wise to ask the student questions to find out exactly what is involved. Many times, innocuous-sounding terms are actually euphemisms for hazing.

Examples

A would-be cheerleader is made to wear odd clothing in the opposing team's colors and to sing the opposing team's fight song in the school cafeteria, with the result that the crowded cafeteria patrons mock the humiliated student.

Senior students visit the homes of juniors nominated for prom king and queen, wake them at 4 a.m. and videotape them getting ready for school. They then broadcast the videos over the school's closed circuit TVs.

A student hoping to join his high school choir is beaten with a two-by-four and covered with peanut butter, vegetable oil and human waste during an initiation ritual by fellow choir members.

Intoxicated high school seniors throw eggs at and urinate on high school sophomores and break a glass bottle over the head of at least one victim.

A 15-year-old high school student athlete sustains internal injuries after being hazed by several fellow wrestlers who, he contends, penetrated him with a mop handle.

Effects

The view that hazing is a harmless rite of passage, designed to help develop comradery and respect among teammates or other peer groups, is unfounded. The reality is that hazing rituals are frequently dangerous, can often harm relationships among team or group members or even be life threatening.

Hazing has negative effects on both victims and participants and these effects create feelings of apathy, mistrust or isolation rather than of bonding and respect. Hazing can destroy self-esteem, self-confidence, group unity/cohesion, friendships and more. It can create stress and may induce or aggravate psychological illnesses including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or anxiety.

Hazing that involves poor nutrition or substance use has many deleterious effects including malnutrition, body image concerns, disordered eating (fad dieting, compulsive eating, anorexia, and bulimia), alcohol poisoning, alcohol, tobacco or other drug abuse or addiction.

Why hazing takes place

Belonging to a group is a basic human need; we are social beings. For high school aged children, forming a sense of self-awareness and joining a group is a major developmental milestone. By joining a group, individuals can reduce the insecurity of standing alone. They believe they are stronger, have fewer self-doubts, and are more resistant to threats. Many people who join groups/are attracted to them because they believe they will gain a boost in status from membership. And there are many other reasons to join groups. People who join groups have been found to be healthier than those who remain alone.

Difficulties arise however, when conforming to group norms and behaviors involves hazing.

Some "in-groups" maintain their identity, values, and beliefs through hazing. Their members may feel "it was done to us, now it's our turn to initiate the new kids." They look at it as a harmless, bonding experience.

Newcomers wanting to be part of the in-group may subject themselves to hazing because they believe they will ultimately play a role in the group or organization. As the newcomers escalate their commitment to the group, activities or tasks that would normally be out of their comfort zone no longer seem out of bounds.

Connection between bullying and hazing

In many respects, hazing is similar to bullying, but hazing has a tendency to be an institutionalized form of harassment/intimidation centering on initiation rights connected to certain school clubs and activities.

Hazing can be seen as an organized form of bullying. One difference between these behaviors is that bullying typically attempts to exclude a person from the bully's activities while hazing is often a condition of acceptance or initiation into a group.

While bullying may begin in early elementary school, hazing generally does not occur until children are older. As with bullying, however, hazing may involve a ringleader and bystanders who do nothing to stop the activity.

In order to prevent both bullying and hazing, it is important to begin when children are young. Parents, families and elementary schools can explain what and how harmful bullying is to the victim, classroom, school, and community at large. Bullying and hazing should always be seen in the context of respect for self, respect for others.

Re-thinking hazing: the myths and realities

If you think hazing has anything to do with bonding or friendship, you're caught up in the myths about hazing. At its best, hazing builds resentment between new members and initiates. At its worst, hazing can seriously injure or kill.

Myth: They (newcomers) want to be hazed.

Reality: No one wants to be abused, humiliated or embarrassed.

Myth: We only haze a little bit. It's really not that bad.

Reality: That's like saying, "I only steal a little bit. I'm not really a thief."

Myth: If we eliminate hazing, our members will be just like anybody else.

Reality: A truly well organized, positive program results in initiates who are eager to work for and help the group, and who can better serve as leaders.

Myth: If new members don't respect our principles or us, we haze them until they improve.

Reality: Hazing a new member makes the situation worse. Just like other forms of victimization, hazing breeds mistrust, apathy and alienation, not respect.

Myth: Hazing activities are the only methods we have of controlling the new members.

Reality: There are positive and negative ways to bring people into the fold. "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." Accountability should be the same for new members and ongoing members.

Myth: I went through it, so now the new members have to go through it.

Reality: It only takes one group of "veterans" to break this so-called tradition. The people who founded your group were not hazed. Why treat today's new members differently?