

Hazing - It Hasn't Gone Away

Hazing of new members to clubs, groups, teams and other youth activities by senior members has been taking place for a long time. The practice can go by many names and labels including; rookie parties, welcome rituals, initiation ceremonies and freshie days. But, regardless of the name, they all share some common elements that should no longer be welcome in respectful sport and recreation environments. The intent behind these rituals is to embarrass, frighten, degrade or simply subordinate new and vulnerable members.

Just what is Hazing? One of the clearest and most inclusive definitions for hazing is:

“Hazing refers to any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group (or to attain full status in the group) that humiliates, degrades, abuses, endangers or risks emotional and/or physical harm, regardless of the person's willingness to participate.”

This definition (from Hoover 1999) is now used by most sport and fraternal organizations in Canada and the U.S. It goes beyond the standard “shopping list” of prohibited activities and recognizes that the all too common hazers excuse of “everyone participated willingly” does not absolve individuals or organizations of their responsibility to ensure that everyone is treated with respect and dignity.

One popular myth about hazing is that it only happens in certain sports and fraternities/sororities. In fact, both of the large studies done to date on hazing incidence (Alfred University 1999 and University of Maine 2008) tell us that hazing takes place in groups as diverse as sport teams, choirs, high schools, drama groups, Cadets, scouts and guides, youth orchestras, marching bands, intramural sports, summer camps and youth exchange organizations. Since 2007 the Red Cross Support Line has seen a 700% increase in calls with hazing identified as a problem within sport, recreation or cultural organizations in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Those same studies (Alfred and U Maine) emphasized that the culture of hazing starts long before young people arrive at universities and colleges. Over 50% of the thousands of respondents in these studies stated that they assumed they would be hazed in college “because that’s what we are used to having happen” as a requirement to become members of teams and clubs. Well over 50% of the students surveyed indicated that they had been hazed (according to the Hoover definition) at least once prior to attending university.

At its worst, hazing can include sexual assaults and physical injury (even death), but the long terms effects of acts like forced or coerced alcohol consumption or being restrained, blindfolded and left helpless can be as serious. In Saskatchewan and Manitoba “rookie parties” and other initiation rites have led to hospitalizations, serious mental and physical injury, young people withdrawing from clubs and groups and criminal prosecution.

Yet the practice of hazing continues. In some cases the adults in care with an overall responsibility for the safety of youth have turned a blind eye, in effect saying “Don’t tell me what you guys do at your rookie party, I don’t want to know.” Young people are told that there is a

hazing tradition to be maintained - they are told this by former team and club members and sometimes even by their own parents.

There are many good reasons for Board members, leaders, coaches and other adults to pay close attention to practices that purport to be welcoming or initiation rites. Adult responsibility is not lessened by ignorance (wilful or otherwise). These reasons include;

- The Duty of Care to provide a safe environment in which all can participate without being deliberately harmed and understanding the reality that adults in care are potentially liable for any and all acts that take place under their supervision or in the name of their organization, club or team.
- Preventing the potential damage to the public reputation of their club, camp or team and the potential for that reputation to suffer when a hazing ritual becomes publicly known.

A standard response from those who support Hazing rituals has been “This helps to bring them together as a team, club, group of campers etc. The new members feel like they belong once they have gone through this experience. It builds trust.” In fact, the Alfred and Maine studies indicate the opposite. Students reported feeling less trusting and more fearful of the older students who had subjected them to hazing. Not surprisingly those same students talked about eagerly anticipating the time when they could take the role of the hazer and get back “some of their own”.

This cycle of the hazed becoming the hazer’s helps to explain why some so-called “harmless rituals” can evolve over time into practices that seem difficult to understand. A negative evolution with subsequent generations of young people wanting to put their own stamp on pre-existing rituals can see the violence and humiliation ratcheted up year by year. The hazing cycle is one of the reasons why rituals that reinforce power imbalances must be addressed at the start. Ending the “little hazing” rites can keep them from evolving into something much worse.

Organizations cannot and should not wait until a complaint comes forward from a youth or his/her parents. The code of silence around hazing and the pressure on young people to “suck it up” for the team can be intense. It takes a courageous young person to speak out against a practice that may have years of organizational history and support. Adults in care should be proactive about insuring that any welcoming or celebration rituals that take place are:

- Safe and respectful
- Inclusive (veterans and rookies all take part)
- Open to scrutiny by adults
- Voluntary with no consequences for opting out

To find out more about hazing, its effects and alternative safe welcoming rituals you can contact us at **1-866-773-5777** or rdcross@sasktel.net