

## Hazing

When it comes to hazing, youth programs have two things they must do. They need to: 1) ensure that activities within the program do not constitute nor encourage hazing; and 2) they need to ensure hazing does not take place among program participants while in the program but out of sight of the program staff. This is actually fairly easy to do, once you understand what hazing is and how you can reduce the likelihood it will take place.

### What Is Hazing?

Hazing is the term used to describe an activity or activities that a person must do in order to join or participate in a group (or group subset) that tends to:

- Humiliate,
- Degrade,
- Abuse, or
- Endanger

the person, even if the person is willingly participating in the activity. It is important to note that consent is not an element of hazing, as many people erroneously try to get out of trouble by claiming that “everyone agreed”. The very nature of hazing is that someone who wants to join a group bad enough might agree just to get in, but may not fully understand what it is that they will be doing. When pressure or coercion exist, the law has long recognized that true consent is impossible.

Hazing has been seen at almost all ages, from elementary school groups to college/university groups, and even adult organizations/societies. It has taken place in sports teams, bands, military cadet programs, fraternities, sororities, “secret societies”, and even medical schools, and it has taken place for hundreds of years. A quick online search reveals hundreds of documented deaths from hazing, and there have been many more serious physical and psychological injuries for each recorded death. Abusive and dangerous hazing practices have included rape, consumption of alcohol or drugs, beatings, forced exercise, forced drinking of water, eating of particular foods like ‘ghost peppers’ or cinnamon powder, exposure to temperature extremes, sleep deprivation, burial, dunking in water, cutting/stabbing, and even gunshots. Humiliating and degrading acts have included stripping a person nude, shaving their head, wearing particular clothing (that isn’t part of the sanctioned uniform), holding embarrassing signs, singing or chanting, associating only with one particular group of people and shunning others, being yelled at or cursed, and performing sex acts.

Excuses used to justify hazing include:

- It builds a bond/unity between current members and new members
- It shows how much they want to be a part of \_\_\_\_\_
- We have to be able to trust each other

- No one will get hurt
- It is “tradition” or a “rite of passage”

### **How To Recognize and Stop It**

The first step in stopping hazing is recognizing that it is not healthy nor appropriate, and setting the standard in your program that it is not acceptable. All program staff play a role in making sure there is no hazing in the program, and that any hazing identified among participants is quickly identified and stopped. Prior to the start of the program, go through the activities planned for and make sure there is nothing being done that implies or requires participants to do things as a condition of being or feeling accepted.

At the same time, keep an eye out for participants creating their own hazing. If a team is requiring all of their members to do something that might be perceived as hazing, ask questions. Wearing of a team uniform or logo may be perfectly acceptable if all teams are given a chance to do the same thing, but other behaviors (like those described above) might suggest coercion among group members. If membership in the group requires the participant to do anything other than applying based on the his/her own merits and abilities, hazing should be suspected. Ask yourself if the activity is potentially embarrassing, abusive, or dangerous, and if group acceptance is conditioned on doing it. If so, hazing is likely taking place, even if everyone claims to be consenting.

If hazing is identified, the program leadership should make sure all program staff are aware to help identify the breadth of the issue, and then those participating in it should be informed that the behaviors are not acceptable and must cease immediately. Watch for any potential retaliation among group members, and make sure parents are aware of what was identified as happening, why it was not acceptable, and what has been done to address it. Even parents of children not involved should be notified, as it is likely that many of the participants knew about it. If there was illegal action taking place (see also the section on Child Abuse), notify law enforcement so an appropriate investigation can take place.

For more information and resources, including the video “We don’t haze”, visit:  
<https://www.stophazing.org/> and <https://clerycenter.org/initiatives/hazing-project/>