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10 STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CAMPER BEHAVIOR

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"Think positively. When campers do things you approve of, let them know their behavior is appreciated. A smile, a gesture, or a brief word goes a long way."

The Joy and Challenge of Counseling

Camp counselors have exciting and rewarding job. But working with campers also presents its share of challenges. When I worked for a summer at TIC Summer Camp (<http://www.ticcamp.com/>), I was given the following list of tips for managing camper behavior. I saved it for years, and am happy to now pass it on.

10 Strategies for Managing Camper Behavior (care of TIC summer camp)

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1. Reinforce desired behavior

Think positively. When campers do things you approve of, let them know their behavior is appreciated. A smile, a gesture, or a brief word goes a long way.

2. Clearly state privileges as well as rules

All programs have rules, but too many "don'ts" violates rule number 1. If campers know what is permitted, they will not need to test you to find out.

3. Tolerate some unacceptable behavior

Too much attention given to annoying behavior can interfere with your program, and it may actually reinforce that behavior. Also, some habits may simply be typical of an age or stage, so try to be aware of age-typical behavior patterns.

4. Use non-verbal cues

Some undesirable behavior cannot, and should not be ignored. Before responding verbally, however, it may be possible to make your disapproval clear in other ways. Eye contact, along with a firm look, may control the behavior without potentially embarrassing the camper in front of peers. It often helps to position yourself near the camper who is acting out.

5. Consider redirection or change of activity

Sometimes problems result from boredom or dissatisfaction with the current activity. Tasks that are too difficult (or too easy) may lead an individual or a group toward disruptive behavior. Depending on the activity, try to allow for varying skill levels to stay engaged, and "individualize" tasks to correspond to each camper's abilities.

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6. Clarify consequences of undesired behavior

A camper should clearly understand the alternatives available to him or her, and it is important to establish this in the first few days. For example, "If you keep pushing Thomas, the following will happen..." As campers learn the rules, you can ask: "If you continue to act this way, what do you think will happen?" Avoid using a threatening tone of voice, and above all, clarify the consequences and follow through if the actions continue.

7. Clarify benefits of desired behavior

This is the positive corollary to number 6: desired behavior yields benefits! Remember that pointing out benefits is most effective if you do so immediately after the good behavior occurs. "Great job, team. Since everyone helped clean up, we got to be first in line for snack!"

8. Use time-out or removal procedures

Sometimes it is advisable to remove a disruptive camper so that little or no positive reinforcement can be received. The camper should be invited back after a short time, contingent on a change in behavior. Remember that this is only effective if the camper is moved to a less reinforcing space, i.e. not on display to peers.

9. Use punishment with caution

Unlike the above strategies, punishment does not allow the camper to avoid consequences by displaying acceptable behavior. Thus, attention is directed to the punishment itself, not the problem. This is in conflict with rule number 1. Punishment should be used only as a last resort or in the case of an emergency involving personal safety.

10. If in doubt, seek help!

Whenever you are unsure of what action to take or are unable to deal with a situation, ask another counselor who

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might be more experienced or be better able to relate to the camper. Or go to your immediate supervisor. No one has all the answers to handling problems, and seeking help is never a sign of defeat or weakness.

A Christian Perspective

If I could add one more tip from a Christian perspective it would be this:

11. Remember that every child is God's child

Each camper is a work of art crafted by God. Each camper bears the image of Christ. Your job is to nurture that image, draw it out, and help that child become the person that God needs them to be.

Matthew Kozlowski lives in Alexandria, Virginia with his wife Danielle and two young daughters. Throughout his career he has been a teacher, camp counselor, school chaplain, camp chaplain, Sunday school teacher, parish priest, and Alpha course coordinator.

June 2, 2014



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