

Top 10 Tips for Working With Today's Campers

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I remember when it occurred to me that working as a camp counselor was more than just having fun with campers. I was a first-year counselor at a boys' resident sailing camp on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. One of the boys in my cabin had the unfortunate luck of being both impulsive and having a temper. I say "unfortunate" because whenever "TJ" got into trouble—and because of his impulsivity that was much of the time—he had a temper outburst. Certainly TJ, I, and the other boys were having a lot of fun learning new skills in sailing and other activity areas. I soon realized, however, that in addition to teaching TJ how to be a better sailor, there were things I could teach him about being a better person. Maybe I could help him get a better handle on both his impulsivity and his temper.

Ever since that summer, I have looked at camp as not only fun, but as an opportunity for children to do a lot of growing up — both socially and emotionally. I have also come to view being a camp counselor as a craft or set of skills, no different in some ways than knowing how to build a camp fire, climb a rock face, put "English" on a tennis ball, or do a lay-up on the basketball court. The more you practice talking with campers, learning how to communicate with them, and understanding them, the better you get at it—just like most other endeavors in life. This may sound self-evident, but many counselors I have met over the years approach their work with children without thinking about it very much. They simply show up at camp and react when a challenging camper behavior arises. In today's world, this approach won't work. Parents and camp professionals expect more out of the camp experience, including having counselors with better skills working with campers.

To help you make the most of your time with campers, I have put together my "top ten list" of tips for working with campers. I have updated this list to include techniques that "fit" the nature of campers today — children who are verbal and resourceful and used to a lot of individual attention, don't necessarily do so well in groups, and often have trouble recovering from a setback. Some of these techniques I have developed myself while others I learned from folks who have had their own success working with campers. Try them on and see what you think!

Top Ten Tips

1. Get to know each one of your campers.

Many campers today are used to receiving a lot of attention from their parents. You've probably heard the term "helicopter parents," which refers to parents who "hover" around their children. Let's just say that many parents have become increasingly involved in many aspects of their children's lives. When children who are raised this way have a problem, they expect mom or dad to swoop in and make it all better. What this means for you is that your campers may need more praise and recognition, since they have been raised to count on more support from their parents.

In addition, each one of your campers is accustomed to being seen as an individual and not as a member of a group or cabin. Unless you take time to get to know some of the interests, talents, and qualities of each of your campers, they won't feel seen and therefore won't be personally connected to you as their counselor. Until your campers are emotionally "on board" with you, they won't get as much out of camp. Consider making a List of Firsts chart. Take time each day to record in a brief meeting with your campers what new thing each of them has done that day at camp. This could be a new skill they've learned or a new activity they've tried or a new friend they've made and so on. The List of Firsts chart not only helps you keep track of all the new things your campers are doing, but it also gives them individual recognition in a group setting — perfect for today's campers!

2. Get into routines right away.

For most children, routines provide security because they are predictable, and they help campers know what is expected of them. Routines are also good for caregivers in that they allow you to plan ahead and put consistency and self-discipline into your interactions with your kids. For example, try using the "five-minute warning" routinely before the end of every activity period. Announce to campers, "Okay, we have five minutes before we have to clean up!" Transitions are hard for children because they involve a small loss — a letting go — of what they have just invested their pride and energy into doing. Using the five-minute warning consistently — in other words, doing it routinely — helps children master those transitions.

3. Keep your directions simple!

Giving campers too many things to do at once is confusing and often results in not too much getting done! Especially for younger children who have shorter attention spans and for children who are easily distracted, try the following routine:

Tell a camper one thing to do. ("Put your wet bathing suit on the line!")

Ask the camper to repeat back to you what you have just asked them to do. ("So what are you going to do right now?")

Instruct the camper to come back and tell you when they've finished.

Praise them for getting it done!

Repeat the process with a new task for the camper.

Step 1

Step 2

Step 3

Step 4

Step 5

Obviously you wouldn't use this method with older children or kids who are selfstarters. With campers who need that extra level of tracking, it works very well.

4. Get on their train before you try to get them on yours.

My friend and colleague, Jay Frankel, has an expression he calls "getting on a camper's train." When a camper is doing something other than what she should be — like looking at a photo album or listening to her iPod® instead of cleaning up — rather than get into a struggle with her, Jay and his True-to-Life team suggest that you take a minute or two and join with your camper in whatever she is doing. In other words, take a moment to look at the photo album with her or ask about the music on her iPod® before coaxing her away from it and onto the task at hand. Entering that child's world on her terms is a great way to develop influence with that child — which is a more powerful and lasting way of motivating children than using threats or force.

5. The human brain can't hold a negative.

When you tell a camper at the swimming pool, "Don't run!" what his brain hears is "Run!" When you tell a camper, "Don't talk while I'm talking!" his brain hears, "Talk while I'm talking!" It is impossible to tell someone not to do something without suggesting the very thing you don't want them to do! What is more effective is telling campers what we want them to do. For example, at the pool, say, "Walk!" In a meeting say, "Listen while I'm speaking. You'll get your turn when I am finished!" Turning negatives into positives is more than just a subtle rephrasing of words. Children today are visual learners, meaning they get a picture in their brains of what behavior we are suggesting when we talk. Giving them a clear picture of what we want, rather than what we don't want helps steer their behavior in a more constructive direction. "Keep your hands to yourself," or, "Use your words when you are upset," are examples of telling campers what we want from them that help them behave more appropriately.

6. Sarcasm has no place at camp!

I once heard a counselor shouting at campers who were late to line-up: "Come on, ladies! My old grandmother moves faster than you guys!" Sarcasm may be said with a hint of affection or humor, but this subtlety is lost on children younger than fourteen — the age at which the human brain "gets" sarcasm. Not that children won't mimic the sarcasm they witness coming from counselors or older campers. They will. But, what younger campers "repeat" is simply hostility — any hint of affection or good-natured humor that one might embed in a sarcastic remark to a friend is lost on younger children. What they repeat is a barb or weapon, which is not behavior I imagine you would want to encourage at camp!

7. Drop the rope!

If you have ever heard a child say to an adult, "You're not the boss of me! I don't have to listen to you!" then you have witnessed an all too prevalent example of how American children have been encouraged to "speak up" and assert themselves. Unfortunately, many children today confuse rudeness with assertiveness. When a child says something provocative, like, "This is a free country! I can do what I want!" or, "My parents paid a lot of money for me to come to this camp! I pay your salary! You clean up!" rather than get into an argument — which I call picking up the emotional rope — use the following four-step response:

Step 1

Stay calm and let go of the provocation (in other words, drop the emotional rope!).

Step 2

Make campers "right" about what they are "right" about. For example, "You're right. I'm not your parent!" Or, "You're right — it is a free country! Isn't that great!"

Step 3

Pause and then simply say "... and ... everybody knows (because everybody does know) that at camp, part of camp is cleaning up. And you can do this — it's no big deal!"

Step 4

Then stop talking and move on! One of the biggest mistakes adults make with children is we talk too much! Less is more!

When it is clear that you are not going to pick up the bait and get into an argument, you throw that camper off balance. Second, using the word "and" as opposed to the word "but" helps kids stay with you. When we say "but," we negate whatever we just said and kids tune out. Third, state simply and calmly what everybody knows, which helps you maintain the upper hand emotionally and signals to the child your confidence.

When you detach and move on you are essentially taking the high road. Children would much rather argue with you than do what they are supposed to do. Detaching takes that option away. Picking up the "emotional rope" is the single greatest mistake adults make with children. Teachers, parents, camp counselors, and even therapists make this mistake. Avoiding it will help establish yourself as a first-rate caregiver!

8. Try using the "triple play" with campers who are having a hard time fitting in.

One of the challenges facing counselors I hear about most frequently is the camper who is a little socially awkward or shy — or just doesn't seem to have an easy time making friends with the other kids in his or her cabin or group. This is where a technique I call the "triple play" comes in. Try pairing that child with one other camper from his group (preferably one he helps choose) and do a fun activity together, just the three of you. As my colleague and fellow camp consultant, Faith Evans, has pointed out for years, when children play together they get to know one another more easily.

Fun is a great elixir, and some children have a much easier time getting to know other children one-on-one than they do when faced with an entire group! You can vary this technique by adding another child to the mix or pairing the child with different partners over the course of a week. It's a nice break for you, too, as a counselor and will give you a chance to get to know some of your campers better.

9. Teach your campers how to share and have gratitude.

Children used to learn simple social skills like sharing or waiting their turn in preschool and kindergarten. Because of the pressures placed on children these days to "get ahead" academically, what children learn instead of key social skills are things like how to count to 100, how to spell various words, and even how to read — all tasks that used to be learned in first grade. You may actually have to teach your campers how to share or have a sense of gratitude. In addition, many campers take for granted all the hard work it takes to make camp happen. Teaching them how to share and have gratitude will help them work better together in their cabin or group.

Try gathering your campers for ten minutes each day at the end of the day and have them raise their hands when they have an example to share with the group of something that happened that day that they are grateful for or something that someone has shared with them that day, like friendship or a toy or their time and help during clean-up.

Encouraging gratitude helps create an environment where friendship and respect flourish.

10. You and your co-counselors should "tag team" your campers.

Trying to work alone with your campers not only deprives you of the expertise and input of other staff members, it is a sure way to end up exhausted, cranky, and resentful at the end of camp! You may have noticed that in my Top Ten Tips I refer to a couple of colleagues — great people who have their own significant contributions to make. I know a good idea when I see one, and I am not against taking that idea and adding it to my "bag of tricks" — if it will help me be more effective with children. I stand on the shoulders of many people who have shared their insights, expertise, and skill with me. I would never have become as effective or successful working with children, if I had not been the beneficiary of the experience of so many others. "Tag teaming" your campers simply means letting others help you out, share the load, and share the success. Everyone will be better off if you are "big" enough to share your campers!

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