

A Cabin Leaders's Guide to Mentoring Youth

by Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

At the close of every season at a ceremony inside a large celebratory white tent, each counselor makes his or her way to the microphone to address an enthusiastic, if somewhat sad, throng of boys and girls holding tight to the waning hours of their summer at camp. What many of these staff members have only recently recognized, perhaps while voting on the award they are about to present or hastily jotting down some things to say about its recipient, are the special relationships they have forged with the youth they served.

But the kids knew it all along.

Indeed, research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) points out that young people themselves rank counselors as some of the most influential people in their lives — though the many letters from my campers that I have, over time, stuffed in an already overflowing file drawer tell a much more compelling story than do data points and pie charts.

The Camp Cabin Leader

While accepting this job as a cabin leader may have conjured up all types of images, from sailing and swimming by day to roasting marshmallows around a campfire at night (or, for some of you, perhaps scarier scenes involving short-sheeted beds or food fights in the mess hall), rarely do they include the ones that will ultimately prevail months from now when you think back on the time spent living with, teaching, and inspiring your campers. Those images will careen around your brain like flashes in a kaleidoscope, leaving behind indelible marks of caring camaraderie and life lessons learned in the most casual of ways — a pickup game, a walk on the beach, or a bedtime talk.

Perhaps it's time for us to front load the download of feel good stories so that you, too, can appreciate the enormity of the role you are about to play and the young lives you are about to reach and likely alter for good. After all, there's no time like the present.

No doubt, your orientation schedule makes exam week look like a cakewalk. You'll likely be barraged with information about bedtimes, health checks, activity choices, safety concerns, homesickness, and communication with parents — important topics one and all, with many more to follow on Day Two. But imbued within all of these discussions should be an intractable link to the relationships — and responsibilities — that come part and parcel with the job of camp counselor.

Who You Become

Ready or not, your role this summer will transform you — making you more other centered than you may have believed possible — and transport you to a new plane of connectedness with youthful experiences you may have only recently left behind. How you establish and maintain relationships with your campers will determine your success. And that success will be measured by your capacity to be a good leader, role model, and mentor for youth. Failure is not an option. The stakes are too high and the outcomes too important.

Indeed, research makes clear that you can play a critical role in fostering positive youth development, promoting personal resiliency, and building protective factors that make poor choices less likely.

The Counselor as Mentor

So, what do you look like in your new role as a mentor? According to more than 3,000 youth sampled for the SADD study, you are trustworthy, caring, understanding, respectful, helpful, dependable, fun, compassionate, and responsible. (They also say you are a good listener and someone who offers good advice!)

I am . . .	Yes	No	I am . . .	Yes	No	I am . . .	Yes	No
Trustworthy			Caring			Understanding		
Respectful			Helpful			Dependable		
Fun			Compassionate			Responsible		

Are you? Find out for yourself by checking yes or no next to those attributes listed in the chart below.

Three Steps to Becoming a Successful Mentor

While there are many paths to becoming a leader and mentor of youth, most reflect the extent to which you proactively seek to establish meaningful relationships with your campers. Here are three steps to help you succeed!

1. Prepare

Preparing for success as a cabin leader is just as important as preparing for a big exam, a playoff game, or a first date. Cabin leader who excel in their role at camp come prepared each season and each day.

The best place to start is to know what you're getting yourself into. Ask a lot of questions. Understand the expectations the camp has for your work with the children, the protocols for communication with parents, and the parameters for acceptable personal conduct (on and off campus).

Expectations

Just as important, seek out information that communicates the expectations of the customers: parents and kids. These will guide your interactions, strategies, and priorities. Camp directors say that parents rated the following as the most important benefits of sending their kids away: increasing self-esteem and self-confidence; making new friendships/getting along with others; providing a safe place; and offering fun activities. That's what they expect from the camp. Here are some of the things parents have told us they want from you.

- Communicate information
- Have a sense of humor
- Clarify expectations
- Be relaxed
- Be a good role model
- Show leadership
- Have fun with their kids
- Model responsible behavior
- Discourage foul language
- Teach fair play
- Supervise for safety
- Show a knowledge of each camper
- Be fair to all campers
- Encourage campers to try new things
- Foster self-confidence
- Be patient
- Be vigilant

The expectations of the campers are important, too! And fortunately for us, they are generally easier (and quicker) to identify. Kids want camp to be a place at which they can:

1. Have fun
2. Make friends
3. Feel good about themselves

They also want to form meaningful relationships with you!

Finally, be prepared to actually meet (or, better yet, greet) your campers. Learn a little bit about them ahead of time so when Johnny introduces himself you can say, "Oh, Johnny, you're from New York City, one of my favorite places!" Or, when Susie tells you she wants to sign up for swimming, you can offer, "I hear you did really well in the swim meet here last summer!" Demonstrating that you know something about a child sends a very clear message that you are interested and that you care.

Remember that relationship building begins when the child first arrives at camp—and so does the chance to help that child grow. Michael Pastore, author of *Dynamite Counselors Don't Explode*, suggests that the first moment you meet a camper is one of the most important moments of the summer. Why? Because the child will begin to

immediately answer some important, unspoken questions: Do you care about me? Are you on my side? Are we going to work and play together as equal partners and best friends?

From day one, moment one — you are on duty! Construct your relationships with great care, for they will determine your success as a camp counselor.

2. Practice

Okay, now that you've gotten off to a good start, it's important to stay in practice! Just as great athletes or musicians practice to stay sharp, so do great cabin leaders. Practice good communication skills, good role modeling, and good leadership. And then put them into practice!

Communication Skills

Communicating effectively with your campers means following some basic rules.

- Praise your campers — even for the little things they do that may be easy to overlook.
- Spend time with each camper — not just the most likable, most successful, or best looking.
- Learn how to listen actively, paraphrasing and repeating back to them what you have "heard" them tell you.
- Share your own stories or (appropriate) details of your day, thereby modeling good communication and encouraging them to learn listening skills for themselves.
- Read between the lines, as campers may not always immediately tell us what they are thinking or feeling.
- Respect what your campers have to say, even if you disagree.
- Remember to tell them that you care about them!

Of course, communicating as a counselor also means giving feedback, both positive and constructively critical.

When offering feedback to your campers, always remember to focus on things that he or she can actually change (a behavior of his, for example, or the way she responds to requests from you); be direct (because of cognitive differences between kids and adults, it is often difficult for children and teens to pick up on nuances we may assume they'll understand); speak in specifics, not generalities ("It makes some of your cabin mates uncomfortable when you use bad language," instead of "The other kids are mad at you."); avoid being judgmental (focus on the behavior, not the person); and be sure to pick a time when your camper is likely to be receptive to what you have to say (when both you and she are calm, for example, or during a quiet time as opposed to pulling him away from a favorite game or activity).

Role Modeling

Being a good role model may seem to be an obvious attribute of an accomplished camp counselor. But it may be easier said than done. After all, what exactly is a role model and how do you become one?

According to Wikipedia, the term role model was introduced by sociologist Robert K. Merton. Merton said that individuals compare themselves to "reference groups" full of people who occupy the social role to which they themselves aspire. The term then passed into general use to mean any "person who serves as an example of a positive behavior." In short, it is quite likely that your campers will aspire to be like you — especially if you display the types of positive behavior that will bring reinforcement from other important figures in their lives, such as parents, teachers, coaches, and friends.

When I talk to our cabin leader assistants about being a role model for younger children, I often invoke the following advice from author H. Jackson Brown:

- Never compromise your integrity.
- Hug children after you discipline them.
- Tell your kids how terrific they are and that you trust them.

- Laugh a lot. A good sense of humor cures almost all of life's ills.
- Practice empathy. Try to see things from other people's points of view.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."
- Don't be afraid to say "I made a mistake."
- ever underestimate the power of words to heal.
- Don't be afraid to say "I'm sorry."
- Learn to show cheerfulness, even when you don't feel like it.

Leadership

Finally, being a good leader is a great way to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with your campers. And who is a leader? According to the LEAD (Leadership, Education and Development) program at Rollins College, "A leader is one who is able to effect positive change for the betterment of others, the community, and society. Leadership involves collaborative relationships that lead to collective action grounded in the shared values of people who work together."

Steven Olson, president of Generative Consulting, a leadership development organization, says that a good leader is someone who displays the qualities that make any person "good," only they do so while exhibiting the skills of leading. So, what makes a good person? He goes on to describe good people.

- Generous (altruistic)
- Fair (just)
- Egalitarian (humble, respectful of others' dignity)
- Responsible (self-accountable), and
- Honest (truthful)

I am...	Yes	No
Generous		
Fair		
Egalitarian		
Responsible		
Honest		

So ... are you?? Let's hope so, because you will need to be all of those things to be a truly effective leader at camp. Find out for yourself by checking yes or no next to those attributes.

I ...	1	2	3
Take Initiative.			
Establish the pace.			
Set a positive example.			
Show energy.			
Listen to others.			
Encourage everyone.			
Build trust.			
Relieve tensions.			
Create fun.			

And while you're at it ... try rating yourself on these other characteristics of successful leaders. 1 (high) - 3 (low)

3. Personalize

Last but not least, you can maximize your mentoring efforts by personalizing your relationship with each camper. As in other areas of your life, no one size fits all when it comes to establishing, keeping, and growing friendships.

You can personalize your relationships with your campers by learning and communicating about their interests, strengths, goals, concerns, and plans for the future. Moreover, you can walk with them down the path of healthy human development by helping them to achieve a positive Sense of Self, encouraging them to take positive risks, and by recognizing their important rites of passage.

Sense of Self

Sense of Self has many different definitions — and very different meanings to different people. In this context, Sense of Self refers to a young person's self-evaluated progress on three important developmental tasks: attaining

a stable sense of identity (Who am I?); establishing some degree of independence from parents (a natural by-product of the camp experience); and establishing healthy relationships with peers. Research from SADD tells us that young people with a high Sense of Self more often report feeling smart, successful, responsible, and confident than their low Sense of Self counterparts do. They also more frequently refer to positive relationships with their parents and say they avoid alcohol and other drugs. You can help by:

1. Reflecting back to your campers whom you see them to be (e.g., friendly, outgoing, reserved, a hard worker, a team player, conscientious, caring);
2. Reinforcing their independence at camp by commenting on their ability to be self-directed, to make positive choices and accept responsibility for personal behavior, to express confidence in their own abilities to succeed in activities and with peers, to explore new opportunities, to contribute positively to the camp community, and to ask for help when they need it;
3. Facilitating the construction of meaningful, mutually caring, and respectful relationships with peers. Camp provides a wonderful laboratory for kids to experiment with socialization skills. You can help by:
 - o Promoting play and encouraging everyone's participation. Play helps kids expend energy, deal with frustrations in a physical way, get the human contact they crave, satisfy their need to compete, channel aggression in socially acceptable ways, and develop social skills.
 - o Praising kids. Studies show that praising children in front of their peers can actually make them more popular. Popularity among peers is of critical importance to kids and affects their overall emotional, even physical, well-being. Popular kids tend to be healthy, poised, adaptable, and conforming. They generally have moderate levels of self-esteem and ask for help when they need it.

Taking Positive Risks

Camps offer kids a world of new choices and opportunities. Children (and adults) need to try new things to make new discoveries about themselves, to grow, and to better understand the people and places around them. Many of us, and many of your campers, may be afraid to try new things. It involves taking risks. And that sometimes means exposing vulnerabilities we and they might prefer remain private. Your unconditional support and acceptance will go a long way toward helping kids position themselves for risk-taking. They'll also likely be looking to see what kind of positive risks you take!

Creating opportunities for positive risk-taking can have the added benefit of decreasing the likelihood of negative risk taking. We all need to keep an eye out for kids with a propensity to take negative risks and to work hard to promote positive ones instead. More research from SADD reveals that young people who take positive risks are 20 percent more likely to avoid destructive behaviors than are those who do not. They are also more likely to describe themselves in positive terms and to say they often feel happy.

Some of the most important positive risks that young people can take are the physical, social, and emotional risks that come hand-in-hand with camp. For example, young people who challenge themselves by engaging in physical or athletic events (e.g., rock climbing, swim meets); joining in social activities with other teens (e.g., dances, skits); or opening up and sharing their feelings about their own life experiences (e.g., being away from home, conflicts with a friend) may get more out of the camp experience than those who don't.

Here are some other examples of positive risk-taking:

- Trying a new activity
- Reaching out to make a new friend
- Attempting to clear up a misunderstanding
- Volunteering to help others
- Mentoring younger children

Recognizing Rites of Passage

In an increasingly complex, dispersed, and fast-paced society, summer camp remains one of the final frontiers for young people seeking formal affirmation of advancing maturity and, ultimately, initiation into adulthood. Through structured, goal oriented activities taught and supervised by authority figures and role models, children at camp benefit from "community observance" of achievement – whether in small-group or all-camp settings.

While young people need, and desperately want, their parents to pay adequate attention to the "important" things (some say their parents pay too much attention to the "wrong" things), they also look to other important adults as barometers of their progress in an uncertain world. That is precisely why you as a camp counselor are uniquely empowered to satisfy at least some of the attention needs of children as they climb the ladder toward adulthood.

The data suggest that young people who receive adequate recognition at key intersections of development are more likely to have a positive Sense of Self and to take positive risks. In turn, they are then more likely to avoid drinking and other drug use.

There are three important ways in which you can help young people enjoy safe, healthy rites of passage.

1. You can recognize key transitions. These will differ from one camper to the next. For example, for one child this may be the first time away from home and thus represents an important milestone. For others, it may be advancing from being a camper to a CLA. Cabin leader can aid campers in building bridges between whom they were, whom they are, and whom they are becoming.
2. You can encourage campers' participation in activities embedded with opportunities of measurable progression toward accomplishment of standardized achievements (e.g., awards) or goals (e.g., completion of projects).
3. You can offer unique opportunities for increased responsibility – especially for younger campers – they may not have elsewhere and that carry with them inherent feelings of maturity and independence.

Who They Become

Studies have demonstrated the powerful role of mentors (both formal ones, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and informal ones, such as camp counselors), documenting evidence of improved school work, better relationships with parents and other children, reduced acts of violence, and lower rates of alcohol and drug use.

According to the SADD study, young people who identify at least one influential, "natural" mentor in their life report that they have a higher Sense of Self and are more likely to take risks that affect their lives positively. The study also points out that the breadth and depth of mentoring—the number of mentors teens have or the range of topics they can discuss with a mentor—significantly influences decisions young people make around drinking, drug use, and sex.

What about camp kids? The data here is encouraging as well.

For example, young people who participated in camp are significantly more likely than those who have not to report being highly mentored (37 percent vs. 23 percent); taking positive risks (48 percent vs. 30 percent); and having a high Sense of Self (53 percent vs. 40 percent).

In addition, these young people are significantly less likely to say they:

- Drink alcohol (26 percent vs. 36 percent);
- Drive after drinking alcohol (14 percent vs. 23 percent);
- Smoke marijuana occasionally or more often (8 percent vs. 18 percent); and
- Have had sexual intercourse (29 percent vs. 40 percent) or oral sex (29 percent vs. 39 percent) or engaged in other sexual behavior (19 percent vs. 26 percent).

In the aggregate, young people who have not spent time at a summer camp are twice as likely as those who have to report that they are Repeaters, as opposed to Avoiders, of destructive behaviors (8 percent vs. 16 percent).

Trading Heroes for Ghosts?

Many bemoan what they see today as a lack of true heroes to seed healthy physical, social, and emotional growth of children. Yet, the anecdotal and statistical evidence say otherwise. Heroes do exist—and you are, or can be, among them. Young people very much want the active involvement of caring adults and young adults in their lives and reap many significant benefits from those relationships they would be hard to quantify. Yet, some of them will no doubt find their way into the letters, e-mails, or text messages you may receive long after the last campfire, the last sunset, the last walk on the beach.

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