

Seven Skills of Highly Effective Counselors (July-August, 2004)

Whether you are a volunteer, a new staff member or a seasoned counselor, working with campers can be both rewarding and challenging. Children can be fun, warm, engaging and energetic. They can also be cranky, mean to one another, over-stimulated and stubborn! Being successful with campers requires that you have a consistent approach and a firm grasp on a handful of skills to deal with unwanted behavior as it shows up. The following seven skills are ones I have seen successful counselors use most often when working with campers.

Skill #1: Don't pick up the rope!

Of all the things I say to counselors, this is the one they tell me is the most important and the most useful. When campers challenge you, it may be tempting to get into a power struggle with them. This is so easy to do that even teachers and parents fall into this trap! I call this the emotional tug of war, with you pulling on one side saying, "Look, I'm the counselor, you have to listen to me!" And a child on the other side saying any of a number of things, like, "I don't make my bed at home, so I don't have to make it here!" When you get into that struggle, you are actually less effective because children are then reacting to your anger or frustration and not your good intentions. They derive great satisfaction knowing they have "gotten" you!

The most effective way to respond when a child "throws us their rope" is not to pick it up! There are a whole host of things children can say that may trigger us, so it is best to be aware of them and practice how to respond. The following are a few examples:

Camper: "You're not my parent...I don't have to listen to you!"

Effective response (spoken calmly): "You're right; I'm not your parent. And... everyone knows that at camp we all help clean up." (Then encourage them and move on!)

Camper: "My father/mother is a lawyer... I can get you sued!"

Effective response: Ignore the threat—responding to it would be picking up the emotional rope. Simply, but calmly, state that you are glad the camper's parent has such a great profession, and you still expect them to clean-up, wash their hands, help out, or whatever the request is that you've made of them.

Camper: "My parents pay a lot of money for me to come to this camp! I can do what I want!"

Effective response (again, spoken as calmly as you can): "I'm glad your parents are able to send you here. That's great! And...you and I both know (remember this phrase, you can use it over and over) that your parents didn't send you here to be wild. And...everybody knows that part of camp is cleaning up; helping out; going to activities; etc." Then move on!

The most important part of “don’t pick up the rope” is staying calm. This takes some practice. Make it a game with yourself—that you refuse to let a camper push your button. If they succeed, they win and you lose! (Actually, if they succeed in “pushing your button,” everybody loses!) Also, responding with a sarcastic comeback, while tempting, only encourages many campers to prolong the argument. Sarcasm is just another way of picking up the rope!

Skill #2: Enter their world.

One of the reasons campers do not comply with counselor requests is because they are actually looking to engage you. Behind this desire for attention is a longing for adults to take an interest in their world—their reality. For example, if you encounter a camper sitting on their bed playing a game or reading a book when they should be cleaning up, instead of simply barking orders, you might take a moment to be interested in what they are doing. This is like seizing the opportunity to gain a window into their world—their interests, concerns and so on. A few moments spent looking at something together in a kind of momentary “time out” with a camper may eventually result in much more compliance on their part.

In this day of instant messaging, cell phones, weblogs and other technical ways of “being connected,” many children long for the simple attentions of a real, present, interested adult.

Skill #3: State your expectations and detach!

This is an especially effective technique to use with Teens, though it works equally well with younger children. The technique has four steps, as follows: 1) When a camper is not complying with a request, like getting to an activity on time or pitching in to do their part of clean-up, state what you expect clearly and simply. 2) Avoid getting into an argument (picking up the rope!) when the camper complains or tries arguing. Remember, most children would rather argue with you than do what it is they are supposed to do. 3) Restate your expectation, simply and without responding to any arguments being thrown your way. 4) Detach. This means walk away! Move on to your next task or the next camper and leave the camper you just spoke with to deal with the dilemma of defying you. If they do defy you, go to skill #7 below.

Skill #4: Redirect!

This technique is used by all parents, day care teachers, school professionals—in short, just about anyone who works with children. When you find campers engaging in some kind of play or activity that is potentially harmful or dangerous or emotionally hurtful to someone else, try redirecting or channeling their energies into a different activity. In other words, capitalize on their momentum and simply move it into an activity that is interesting, but less risky.

At rest hour, for example, left to their own devices, many campers tease one another or get noisy and restless. Creating quiet chess, checker or card game tournaments can help keep campers occupied in ways that are a change from the hectic pace of camp, but still engaging.

Skill #5: Make campers “right” about what they are “right” about!

Many times campers will try to avoid doing what they are asked by engaging us in an argument. Children today seem especially adept at this diversionary practice, so you need something that works. The most effective way to deal with this is to make campers “right” about what they are right about. For example, if a camper complains about it being too hot, and uses this as an excuse not to do their chore, agree with the part that is “right,” as follows: “You’re right! It is hot!” Pause for a moment and let this sink in, then continue: “and...we still have to clean up!” Campers may not like your response any better, but it will help you stay out of an argument and move on.

Skill #6: Separate a camper from their audience.

There are times when campers may become highly provocative or resistant to counselor instructions. If you feel a camper is having an especially difficult time, taking them away from their group (or having their group move on without them with another adult to supervise them) may help them settle down. Sometimes campers “play to an audience,” and other times they may simply feel less secure and more threatened in front of their peers. In either case, separating them from their group may help.

Skill #7: Getting back to respect.

When a camper refuses to do something that is expected of all campers, such as cleaning up, listening to a counselor or going to activities, it often helps to take them aside to speak with them. Once you and the camper are somewhat away from the group, say, “I have asked you, in a respectful way, to listen to me (or whatever the request is). Are you telling me that if I ask you in a respectful way, you are going to refuse me?” Then be silent and wait. If the camper is still defiant or provocative, it is time to go to your supervisor with your camper and say, in front of the camper, “I have asked Jason in a respectful way to (name the request—clean up; go to their activity on time; listen while I am speaking to the others; etc.) and he/she has refused.” Your supervisor should then verify this with your camper in front of you. “Is this true, Jason? Is it true that Mike, your counselor, has asked you to (name the request), and they have done it in a respectful way, and you have refused?”

What this approach does is cool the situation down, enlist the support of your supervisor (without you giving up your position as the camper’s primary care-taker) and move the discussion to a higher-stakes level. Most campers comply or begin talking about what they need in order to comply. Campers who are still defiant at this point

might need further intervention with the camp director or in a conference call with parents, arranged not by you, but by your supervisor.

Summary

In looking at these skills it is important to remember three things. First, campers will more likely watch and emulate to what you do rather than listen to what you say. Whether you know it or not, you are a powerful role model. Behave the way you want your campers to behave. Second, keep your cool! Young or inexperienced counselors think the louder they scream or the more forcefully they speak to campers, the more in awe of them campers will be. This backfires. Power with children comes through influence, not force. Third, have reasonable expectations. In the short time you have with campers you may be able only to manage their behavior, not change it. The skills above are designed to help you do this. Like any other set of skills, the more your practice, the better you will become. Mastering skills with children not only helps them grow, it helps everyone get more of the good there is to get out of camp.

Used by permission from the author, Bob Ditter, granted 2011.

www.bobditter.com