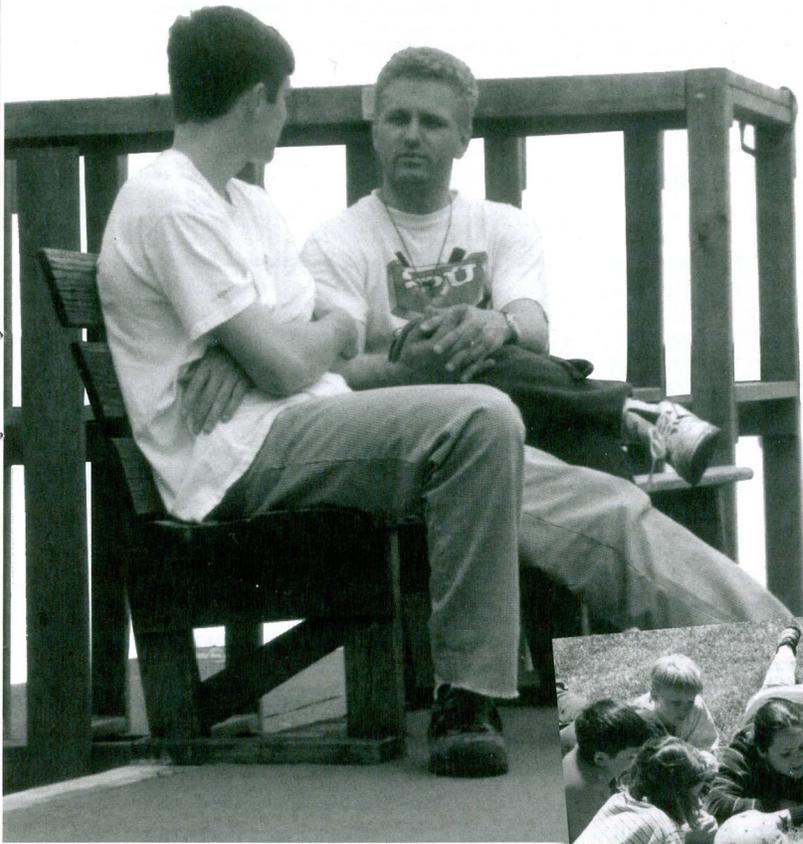


# The Counselor's Key Role

By Ron Habermas



**C**ounselor-in-training. Leader-in-training. Wrangler-in-training. All are familiar terms in the world of camping.

But the time has come to fashion a new phrase to the common vocabulary of our camp and conference profession: counselor-as-parent. Even more important than the other worthy terms cited above, I am convinced that the concept of counselor-as-parent will emerge as a non-negotiable role and task of successful Christian ministries in the twenty-first century.

I teach at a Christian university. For decades, all kinds of schools (including those like mine) have debated whether the responsibility of *in loco parentis* was valid or not. That's Latin for "in the place or position of a parent." I used to dismiss such challenges to replicate certain duties of home. Now, after more than 15 years in Christian higher education, I've reversed my position. And I hold the same outlook for camping.

Much of what the church could count on merely 10 years ago is essentially absent or in painful need of

major repair—basic qualities like biblical literacy, intact homes, commitment to moral absolutes, and character formation.

No, I'm not a doomsday prophet, but I'm a realist. No, I'm not suggesting that camps should usurp the authority of the home, but they can augment it. No, I'm not overestimating what can be accomplished in

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only a handful of days with the average camper; rather, I'm sure that, even in a week's time, we can make substantial, countercultural progress toward our Christian goals.

My confident attempts to promote this model of counselor-as-parent is based upon two corresponding reference points:

1. extensive research on parenting that I was able to conduct last year; and
2. illustrative support from my personal parenting of three daughters who've reached 19, 15, and 12 years of age.

In particular, I recently interviewed 23 experts who serve in various church and parachurch organizations concerning their advice on parenting.

Although their comments were diverse—sometimes even contradictory—their conclusions went well beyond domestic issues. For they all implicitly communicated one pertinent fact: The same core principles of parenting could be extended into other areas of Christian service, such as camping.

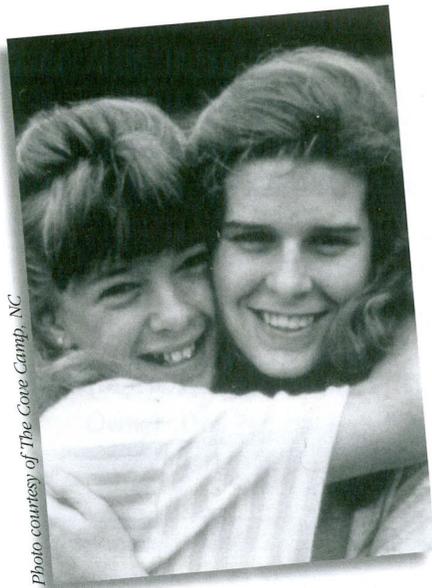


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Several practical suggestions—embracing three key pieces of advice—surfaced from our talks, as demonstrated by the following handful of representative comments from these interviewed experts.

### 1. Honor Thy Camper

Repeatedly, the leaders that I spoke to focused on the fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and mother.” But they tweaked it a bit. Actually, it was more like a radical reversal. “Honor your children,” they declared in union. By way of translation they were also proposing: “Honor all campers.”

“Just why is this first piece of advice so important?” one might ask. It’s based on the truth that all people still possess the Image of God. We reflect our Creator, albeit in a distorted fashion, since the fall.

What did these nearly two dozen experts mean when they referred to the need to honor people? How do we do that in camping?

#### *Honor Campers by Taking Them Seriously*

Wayne Rice, president of Understanding Your Teenager, an organization aimed at equipping parents of pre-teens and adolescents, suggests an ironic twist to the call to honor children: “One of my favorite memories of my dad is that he always laughed at my jokes. And I’ll always

be grateful for his wisdom. Because I’ve listened to my own kids’ jokes, and they’re pretty terrible—and I have a feeling that mine were, too. But my dad honored me by laughing at my jokes.”

Taking campers seriously doesn’t mean we always have to be serious. It means paying attention to them. Showing respect. Building up their self-esteem. In brief, honoring campers has to do with seeing the world the way they see it, then acting accordingly: like listening—without prematurely judging—to the camper’s perspective of how his or her day went; reading verbal and non-verbal speech.

I have found that the very best way to take kids seriously is to walk a tightrope between two extreme perspectives. It’s a tension that has gotten me into trouble now and then since it’s so easy to fall off into one form of error or the other.

On the one hand, the application of “Image” means avoiding the errant position that treats children like miniature adults, expecting too much from them too early. Notice how, in I Corinthians 13:11, the apostle Paul

never talks condescendingly about children or claims kids should be like adults, as some speculate; but he *does* judge adults who act immaturely like a child. That is, the apostle rightly distinguishes between childlikeness and childishness.

On the other hand, we are to show youngsters the same dignity that we exhibit to our closest adult peers. Show them respect for who they are, the same way we expect such treatment from others. This tightrope act differentiates between children’s performance and their person; it distinguishes what they are

able to accomplish versus who they are, their *doing* from their *being*.

#### *Honor Campers by Encouraging Tough Questions*

“Create a setting where questions are acceptable. A kid should always have permission to ask, ‘Why?’ ” So Roger Cross counsels, from his position as president of Youth for Christ, USA. “If a young kid starts raising basic issues of life, but her environment discourages her [from doing so], she won’t ask tough questions later on.”

Again, it’s a personal testimony of his own younger years that convinced this national leader. “One of the greatest revelations in my walk with Christ was that if I couldn’t ask any questions, then God isn’t who He says He is. We don’t have to be afraid of *any* questions.”

Take a thorough inventory of your own camp using this practical advice. Be ruthless in your assessment, and ask yourself: “If a hidden video was produced of the discussions at my camp or conference—both planned and spontaneous talks—what ‘taboo’ subjects would be revealed?” Would the tape indi-

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cate that controversial topics like politics and sex—even tough issues of faith—are implicitly avoided? Or explicitly sidestepped? If our intention is to help our kids make Jesus their Lord, then virtually no taboos should be permitted. (This fact does not rule out the need for prudence and discretion, however.) For, as the saying goes: “Either Jesus is Lord of all or he’s not Lord at all.”

#### *Honor Campers by Creating an Inviting Place*

How can our camps be transformed into warm, inviting places

for our familiar clientele of youngsters and their pals? At its center, it requires settings that consistently shout out loud: *Come in and take your shoes off for awhile.*

Purposeful and frequent interactions with our campers are critical if we desire strong relationships. In my family, these interactions usually happen when my wife, Mary, and I take regularly scheduled walks with our children in our neighborhood and consistently "update our files" on our three kids. From mundane trivia to significant prayer requests, we attempt to really know each individual and their dynamic lives: their abilities, activities, preferences, needs, and dispositions.

Camp environments yield dozens of potential opportunities every day where we can put out the welcome mat for youngsters.

## 2. Invite Campers Into Our World

Perhaps the simplest yet most provocative of these experts' three primary recommendations was that parents must consistently bring their children into their lives and into their faith. Many of life's faith convictions are "caught" as well as "taught." And such healthy, implicit connections with young kids early on can only bring rich rewards to our camps when the teen years begin.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 express the balance between "caught" and "taught" better than any in the Bible. There, Moses directs us to talk about the commandments of God—that's the *taught* part—"when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up"—that's the *caught* part, in the natural settings of daily life.

How is this second prominent piece of advice accomplished? Two particular tactics became evident.

### Let Them See Us in a Variety of Settings

We faithfully invite our loved ones into our lives when they *actually* play a significant part in our

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schedules. Granted, much of what presently makes up our camp schedule already focuses on the camper. Could we really do more? I believe we can—yet not so much in terms of *quantity* as in *quality*, not so much concerning *more* interaction, but *what kind* of interaction.

How can we regularly invite our campers into our world? Why not turn routine, daily errands or chores—like making the rounds across the facilities or getting ready for scheduled activities—into a one-on-one “buddy time” with one or two of the campers? How about developing some creative plans for some of your campers to get to know you by brief, spontaneous interactions (and even longer periods of time during inclement weather) where all participants respond to open-ended questions? For example, “One time I really got scared when . . .” or “My favorite song is . . .” or “If God would grant me one wish, I’d ask Him for . . .” Let kids see you both during *scheduled* and *unscheduled* times.

#### **Let Them Know Our Values**

More confessions of a parent: I used to believe that my young children were best helped when I exhibited only a moderate display of my emotions for them to observe. I never let them see me upset, angry, or struggling on the one hand, and never expressed too much thrill or joy on the other. I don’t know if it had to do with the biblical call for “moderation in all things” or what. All I know *now* is that I was dead wrong.

Not only is that mindset incorrect, but it’s boring and (more importantly) unrealistic. By not exhibiting a full range of appropriate emotions, I was, at best, not showing my kids how to live their own faith-in-life through the varied circumstances of suffering and celebration.

At worst, I was encouraging the repression of those missing emotions

Play back a few memorable encounters you’ve recently had with campers. Jot down some of the conversations they heard or participated in. Based on those encounters, what *implied values* do you believe your campers would identify as *yours*, if they could?

Are you satisfied with what you discovered? If not, what other activities or talks would convey your intended morals or priorities better? Consciously include those strategies in your repertoire next time.

### **3. Instruct Children in a Relevant Faith**

I believe one of the greatest snares most of us fall into is we tend to prefer one of two instructional excesses: either we value the strategy of “caught” over “taught,” or vice versa. We overemphasize our implicit model

**“Private instruction” is . . . being sensitive to unique individual personalities and growth patterns, and taking time to customize (not compromise) God’s truth to all people as individuals.**

of faith (as we ignore our explicit teaching), or we do the opposite.

What would happen if we were even more intentional about our instruction? I believe two accomplishments would result.

#### **Customize the Truth According to Their Individual Lives**

Proverbs 22:6 is a core Scripture

verse of many camps: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” Most contemporary experts agree that this pivotal verse features a useful tension between *prescriptive* approaches to instruction (the way “he *should* go”) and *descriptive* approaches (the “way” that is more natural to that particular child, given their dispositions, individual gifts, learning styles, and so forth).

In Mark 4:33, Jesus provided a concise model that valued both sides of this instructional tension: “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the work to them (i.e., the *prescriptive* focus) as much as they could understand” (i.e., the *descriptive* design, which favors the fact that natural, human limitations—like inability to pay attention because of physical exhaustion or weak faith—restricted what Jesus actually taught the Twelve). That is, He was *customizing* not *compromising* God’s truth in each disciple’s life, according to who they were.

Our family was recently planning what we would do on our Spring Break together. One of the ideas included a combination service project and ski trip in Colorado. As the five of us discussed the details, my wife and I regularly reminded ourselves of our three children’s unique developments and what specifically moti-

vated each one when it came to learning. Our instruction for our sixth grader, Susie, centered on *what* we would be doing (valuing her event-focus). Our talks with Melissa, our tenth grader, featured *why* we were doing what we were doing (prizing her logic-focus). While with Elizabeth, 19, we discussed *who* also would be doing

what we planned to do (reaffirming her social-focus). Emulating the Master Teacher, in the end, caused Mary and me to purposefully teach truth to our three daughters "as much as they could understand" as unique individuals.

Our explicit instruction of God's truth at our camps and conferences can do no less. We must be both *conscious of* and *committed to* the individual campers we serve, according to their God-designed level of human development.

**Personalize the Truth According to Your Life and Theirs**

A common problem in Christian homes is the parents' inability or unwillingness to personally share their faith with their children. When such personalized faith is missing, any residue of superficial convictions that were a part of the child's incomplete domestic training quickly dissipates when the child leaves home or has his or her faith even slightly challenged.

Consider two significant Scriptures. When Moses was documenting his formal instructions about how the Jews were to remember the Passover, he told parents to be particularly attentive not only to *what* they should teach their children but *how* they should educate them. In particular, he commanded that parents were to explain the extraordinary events concerning God's intervening deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians, whenever their young ones asked, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" (Exod. 12:26).

Counselors who want to personalize their faith must take note of those words "mean to you." Without that vital ownership factor, Christianity is reduced to a bunch of ancient rituals and creeds. Jesus makes this very same evaluative comparison when he initially quizzes the disciples: "Who do *people* say the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13b), and then He immediately asks, "But . . . who do *you* say I am?" (Matt. 16:15). The Master Teacher purposefully shifts

from a general population "poll" question to a personalized inquiry. Counselors who are conscious of this difference (because they actively promote ownership faith) will fare far better in passing on a genuine and vibrant faith.

There are at least two specific tactics that apply to overt Christian instruction at camp—without ever succumbing to unethical, manipulative techniques. The first has to do with *public* (or divergent forms of) instruction; the second accentuates *private* (or more convergent) training. "Public instruction" primarily features all potential ways that a camper is taught—for good or ill—"outside" the camp setting. Television, media, phone conversations, Internet, popular music, and so forth, would be included in the "outside" list, since each one of these items either complements or competes with the education provided at camp.

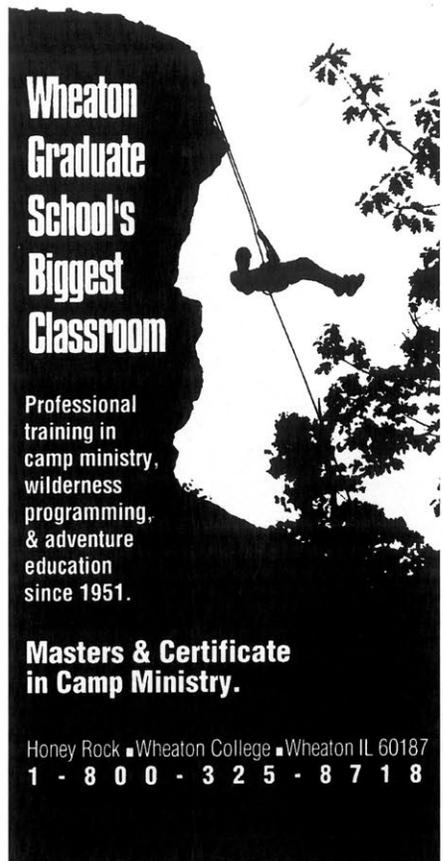
"Private instruction" is more convergent, focusing on a particular individual's training. It's being sensitive to unique individual personalities and growth patterns, and taking time to customize (not compromise) God's truth to all people as individuals. In so doing, we affirm the fact that implicit nurture of our campers is not enough. Certainly we must model our faith, but we must also "talk the walk."



Successful parenting strategies can translate into successful camp counseling. As we honor campers, invite them to join our lives, and explicitly instruct them in a meaningful faith, we embrace the essential strategies that build both strong homes and camps. And counselor-as-parent will have been fashioned as one innovative way to reach a new generation for Christ. 



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