

The Role You Play

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The role of counselor has been described many different ways - as a camper's best friend, as a kind of surrogate parent, or even as a coach. None of these analogies are perfect because being a camp counselor has its own special characteristics and relationships. Since most counselors have not been parents, trying to be one may not be too meaningful.

There are also drawbacks to the concept of being a camper's best friend. You mentioned one drawback in your letter. Besides the ability to set limits with campers (for their own physical and emotional safety), a counselor would not confide in or share with a camper aspects of his or her personal life as one might do with a best friend. A counselor would not expect to get advice from or lean on a camper as one might a best friend. Finally, a counselor would not engage in certain kinds of activities with a camper that one might with friends. So, while a counselor can have a lot of fun and be enormously helpful to a child, being a best friend is a very different kind of relationship.

Another way to view the role of a counselor with children is as a wise, benevolent, and caring older brother or sister. An older brother or sister wouldn't let a younger sibling do something to hurt themselves or others. An older brother or sister would intervene when a younger sibling was getting too wound up. Older brothers and sisters care for their siblings and have fun with them and take an interest in them while still being able to put on the brakes when needed. Also, unlike a friend, there are certain confidences or aspects of your private life you would not share with a younger brother or sister because it would be confusing, upsetting, or put too much of a burden on them. We all know that younger siblings can be curious. An older brother or sister would know this was natural, but would be careful not to share information that was essentially private.



The Decisions You Make

Being an effective counselor also means making sound decisions for your campers. The first question to ask yourself when making a decision that affects campers is, "Whose well being am I serving - mine (I get to be popular; I get to have fun doing what I want to do; I get to be with my friends) or my campers?" A second question is, "What is the risk involved, and am I certain that everyone will be able to negotiate that risk and end up safe both emotionally and physically?" With the greatest of relationships and the best of intentions, if our decision-making endangers or compromises the safety of children, we have lost the trust given to us when we assumed the responsibilities of being a counselor.

The Time You Spend

When it comes to the quality of time a counselor spends with campers, I have some tips that may help you be a more successful counselor:

- The time you spend at the beginning of a session getting to know campers and establishing a way of meeting as a group will pay dividends during the rest of the season. This is the time to establish routines, create a rapport, and win the trust of your campers.
- Make a ritual of meeting at the same time every day for five to ten minutes to simply acknowledge how helpful or considerate specific campers have been to one another during the day. This public recognition should become part of your bunk or group culture. It is especially effective when done at the end of the day.
- Allow your campers to solve problems as a group right from the start. For example, instead of you and your co-counselor imposing your system of clean.up jobs on the campers, have them brainstorm how the system should work. Remember, lay down your ground rules for group problem solving right from the start.
- Challenging Times

When campers begin to show challenging behavior, think of their actions as nonverbal statements. Campers are usually expressing one of three to four sentiments with their misbehavior: they are seeking attention, power, revenge, or trying to protect themselves.

Take a deep breath

The first thing to do when responding to such behavior is to take a deep breath and ask yourself, "What is my intention with this camper?" That is, how do you want to come across? Many younger or inexperienced counselors are not aware of what their intention is and may seem angry or vindictive even when they are trying to be thoughtful or engaging. How you come across to campers will have tremendous effect on what results you get. Ask yourself if you are trying to get even, show the kid who's boss, punish the kid, or get to the bottom of things.

Stay calm

Secondly, stay calm. If you are taking the camper's actions personally, you will react out of anger or frustration and be less effective. Find out what the child is trying to get from his behavior. When kids act in such a way that they either get into trouble or push other children away, it can be powerful simply to say, "I understand what I think you are trying to do; let's see if we can do it in a way that doesn't get you in trouble or cause you to lose friends."

Helping children solve problems and learn social skills is easier if they think you have their best interests at heart. Camp is full of opportunities for children to learn new and more effective behaviors for getting what they want, like making and keeping friends and getting attention and recognition for their true accomplishments. Have a great summer!