

Who Designs Your Camp's Program?

Is your daily schedule solving problems... or causing them?

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This past summer I sent out a new curriculum for camps to try. It included activities for counselors to help their campers learn and practiced the skills required to make friends. The concepts were very well received. We found out which activities were seen as easiest to implement at camp, and which were viewed as too complicated. But I was shocked by the most common remark by the camp directors I interviewed: “We can’t tell our counselors to do specific activities.”

My first reaction was, “Who’s the boss at your camp, anyway?! What do you mean you can’t tell counselors what to do?” Fortunately I didn’t say it out loud, because the view from their side was one of feeling powerless. It seems that their schedules are either very rigid (no time for counselors to do anything with their cabins), or very loose (kids do whatever they want every day). But the result is the same; counselors don’t have any time to just “do stuff” with their campers, and the directors don’t think they have the ability to change that.

Some of you are thinking, “Yeah, so?” Your camp schedule is the only way you’ve ever know it, and what’s really popular today is either a really strict schedule (where everything is done by cabin groups rotating between scheduled activities -- one hour at archery, one hour at canoeing); or “free-range campers,” where the kids pick their own activities every day.

They seem very different, but they’re actually built on the same idea: Create one schedule that requires little or no daily preparation by the counselors, and stick to it all summer. You’d be surprised to know how many camps use one or the other, and staunchly defend their choice (even though their reasons, like their programs, are polar opposites.)



Knowing that, maybe you could take a look at your own program schedule and see not only its strengths, but its weaknesses. Can kids do an activity often enough during a week that they can actually learn a lifetime recreational skill, like canoeing or archery? Or do they get just a taste, (and the same taste next year, and the same the next year...). Years ago, lots of kids learned skills at camp that lasted their whole lives.

Some campers didn’t want to just “shoot bows and arrows,” they wanted to learn to *hit the target*, then hit the bulls-eye, and then get to use the “good” bows. They didn’t just want to splash around in a canoe; they wanted to learn to make it go straight like that good-looking instructor could. They’d

practice the bow stroke, the j-stroke, the draw. They'd *prepare* for the big race. They'd be a *leader* when their cabin went on a canoe overnight. But they could do that because there was a canoeing *class*, with a canoeing *instructor*, that taught a *curriculum* of skill development and mastery.

A few years later *they'd* teach canoeing to campers. Maybe take a date out for a canoe ride at college. And they'd eventually take their *own* children on family canoe trips, building life-long memories, strong bonds, a life-long love for the outdoors, and good health. Same thing for crafts, nature, nature, dance, fishing, volleyball, and outdoor cooking. Millions of kids, each year learning enough about a new hobby to not only *want* to do it again, but be *able* to do it again.

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But that's fairly rare these days. We don't so much teach at camp as we "schedule." We get kids safely from one area to another, one activity to another. We do the planning, we set the rules (including strict time limits), and we do the same thing every day, every week, every year. Kids aren't expected to *want* to learn, we're happy if they just show up. No wonder it gets harder each year to find camp staff who can teach skills. *They* never learned them at camp.

Campers aren't all the same. When a camp does the same thing with every camper, regardless of their age, gender, or past camp experience, then somebody's not getting what they need. It's usually the youngest and the oldest, first-time campers and the teens that don't get a schedule or activities that match.

Think I'm being critical? Consider this: the median camper return rate for summer

resident camps is 55%.* (Day camps are only a little better at 60%.) Not very impressive. But if you look at only *first year* campers you'll find something down right depressing: of first-time summer campers at the "median" camp, less than 40% go back for a second year. (If a soft drink tasted that bad, they'd be out of business pretty quick. There's just so much you can do with glitzy marketing before word-of-mouth catches up with you.)



But those rates are the *medians*. Amazingly, that means half of all camps have even *worse* results. There is some good news in all of this. There *are* camps that have very high return rates -- some as high as 85% (essentially perfect when you account for the kids who age-out). What are *they* doing that lots of us *aren't* doing?

Why Parents Choose Your Camp; Why Their Kids Come Back

If you read my articles on a regular basis, you know we've identified two of the biggest reasons kids come back for additional summers at camp:

Number one: The camp leadership and staff treat parents like *they* expect to be treated; like the decision-making customers they are. Many camps treat parents like a necessary evil. These caring people are the whole reason we're able to operate at all. If they didn't hire us to provide their children with the experiences that they can't provide on their own, we'd all be out of a job, and no amount of good intentions or kid-focused marketing would matter. And parents have told us they want their camp to be: 1.) Safe 2.) Have high-quality, well-trained staff 3.) Teach skills 4.) Create new friendships and 5.) be fun. And that's their priority order.

Number two: Kids have lots of choices for "fun;" it's a commodity to them. Camps can't buy bigger toys than theme parks, or better entertainment than X-box. Friends, however, are very rare, and camp friends are unique. But too often camps run kids through activities mostly to keep them entertained and busy (and out of trouble), instead of for face-to-face interaction where friends are actually made.

Where does your camp's return rate fit, below or above the median? Do you struggle to find new campers every year, or do your satisfied parents find them for you? Do you wonder where kids go when they get to 12 years old, or are your campers returning in such numbers that you're age groups are skewing heavy toward teens? In looking for cause-and-effect trends, BJ Murray, the camp director of the Des Moines Y camp, called all of the YMCA camps reporting return rates of 65% or higher (with some as high as 85%).

In addition to finding just what he expected in regards to treating parents like

partners, every camp had two other things in common.

First, each has an emphasis on the cabin group, spending part of their time each day planning and completing activities together. The variety was wide: skit night, sport challenges against other cabins, overnight campout, a building or art project, picnic, four-square... but they were all things that included time to get to know each other and reflect on their shared experiences.



There's a second and even more unique finding from BJ's study. Every one of those top-performing camps include in their schedule daily skill clinics (I use that generic term here, though each camp has their own name for that activity block), where kids could choose an activity (like dance, crafts, tennis, sailing, etc) and attend several days in a row. Each subject has a progressive curriculum so that by the end of the session campers could develop real skills. In most cases the campers choose their top choices and are given a schedule of

2 or 3 activities a day for 4 to 5 days, For multi-week sessions they could choose new skills the each week. A few camps have a formalized skill progression that campers could record in a pocketsize handbook, allowing more personalized attention to each camper and letting them work at different paces, allowing campers to progress for several years in a skill.



These decisions don't come without their own set of issues. Common complaints are "New counselors often complain they don't know what to do with their campers during cabin time," and, "We have to put so much more time into finding staff that can teach the skills at the level we require, and we could always do better in supervising the quality of our skill classes." But an amazing thing happens at many of these camps: going hand-in-hand with an increasing return rate is more home-grown staff that see it as an honor to teach the skills they learned at camp.

I've seen so many great camps that I no longer believe there's a "best" camp program or schedule design. How it's implemented and the quality of the counselors make the biggest differences. But if you struggle with first-year campers returning, or have a big drop-off when kids reach 13, you could probably benefit from a few changes. Give your youngest kids more structure and to try lots of things with their own counselor. Add skill-development as options for middle to older kids so they can feel challenged and develop competency. Maybe et the older campers have more responsibilities that set them apart from "the kids," and give them chances to make decisions and strengthen friendships. Find ways for your campers to develop character just by being around their own counselors. And that way they'll have time to try something new if you ask them!

*(Sources: YMCAexchange; ACA Research)

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