

Where do kids learn...

The Skills of Friend-Making

There's really only one reason kids will want to return to your camp. Friends. Ask the campers who returned for a second year and you'll get just one answer: "I came back for the friends." Yet when I tour camps, and ask them what they do to specifically help kids make friends, I find out why the average camper return rate is so low. We think it happens automatically. We focus on "fun" instead.

Kids have been making friends "automatically" at camp for decades. But in our effort to be safer, our risk-managers have eliminated many of the times and places where kids and counselors use to make friends. We've taken out a lot of the "down time" where they sat and talked with each other. We prevent kids and staff from being alone together. We fill the days with activities so kids can't "get into trouble." These are all worthy goals, and I'm as glad as any parent that camps are safer. But as camp professionals, we should be smart enough to figure out how to do both.

Kids today do few things where they face each other. They've always faced forward in the school bus and in the classroom, but now they sit side by side and face a video or computer screen when they get home, too. Mom drives them to activities (no more walking) where instead of deciding how to pick teams and agree on the rules in a vacant



lot, they sit on the bench and wait for their coach to rotate them into the game. Then home again in the minivan. More than ever, kids need the times and places where they can sit, face each other, and talk about the activities they've just shared. Otherwise, they haven't shared anything.

Here's an example. Most camps have either a high or low ropes course, or both. We give groups of kids fun, even thrilling experiences there. If you ask the best ropes course instructors where the most important learnings take place, they'll tell you it's in the "debriefing" after each initiative. But just watch your own staff in action and you'll often find they cut that part short or skip it all together to get on to the next event.



Relay races? A view to the back of kids heads. Capture the flag? Lots of running. Archery? “No talking!” Fun “moon-walk” inflatables? Wait in line for your turn. (see what’s happening in the photo above?) But some camps are very different. It shows up in their high return-rates, and in the way their kids keep their memories alive. Memories built on the emotions of friendships.

If I had three wishes for your summer camp program, they would be these:

1.) The summer camp model has long boasted that campers learn positive character and life skills as a result of modeling by their camp counselors. “I’m a professional role model” their t-shirts say. Camp directors spend a large part of their year recruiting, selecting, and training their staff to insure a positive outcome. But the focus in recent years has been almost entirely on safety. We need to be reminded that what parents are paying for, what donors are supporting, and what we all hope for, isn’t just what *won’t* happen; but what *will*.

2.) Give your counselors (and all camp leaders) a clear understanding of what actions and words we could be using every day to show our campers what effective friend-making actually looks like in the lives of people they look up to. Counselors can best help campers make more and better friends at camp if they know what to look for and how to coach individual campers. All the time we spend on activities, special events, and character lessons are wasted if a child can’t associate them with their greatest ongoing need: the need to feel connected, to be liked, and to feel accepted; or in their own words: to “have friends.”

3.) Finally, to really get the full benefit of camp’s opportunity to help kids develop friend-making skills, counselors should learn to go out on a limb and not just model, but deliberately add activities, discussions, and times of reflection devoted not just to values like respect and honesty, but *how* values are put into practice every day in ways that make us “friend-ready.” Counselors are uniquely qualified to actively coach kids into understand that being “friend-ready” isn’t just something you’re born with, but the result of individual words and actions that can be learned *and practiced*. And what safer place to practice, and get helpful feedback, than at camp?

No space in your busy camp schedule? What could be more important than giving all kids the skills they’ll use for the rest of their lives to prevent loneliness? To foster collaboration? To build the empathy required for lasting friendships, marriages, and ultimately peace in the world. *Make* time.



Can it be learned in a week or two at camp? I believe there may be no *other* place with so great a potential for long-lasting change. We've seen it happen, but sporadically. The stuff of anecdotes, but not often enough about predictable outcomes. That's why we need to make friendship-building a deliberate commitment to helping kids learn these life skills.

These three wishes are just "first steps" down a trail where I hope camps and counselors will use, improve, and add-to our understanding of the most effective ways to ensure children receive the gift of friendships. As you find (see the side-bar book review), use, and adapt ideas in your own camp setting, please let me know what you've learned so we can share it with all of our new friends.

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Book Review:

Can You Teach Kids How to Make Friends?

Cathi Cohen's first book, "**Raise Your Child's Social IQ: Stepping Stones to People Skills for Kids**" changed the way thousands of parents look at their children. Specifically, how their kids learn to make friends, and how those skills can be taught. In this new book, Cathi applies her "stepping stones" approach to summer camps.

With this excellent new tool, counselors will help campers practice friend-making, a gift that truly will last a lifetime. "**Stepping Stones to Building Friendships: a Camp Counselors Guide**" breaks down friend-making into individual skills, and then gives many techniques for helping kids grow in these areas while at camp. She includes lots of stories and illustrations, plus an entire curriculum of activities for campers by age groups.

We tested the book with 100 counselors when it was first issued, and discovered something wonderful. The counselors *themselves* were looking for help in making friends, and just seeing this lifelong task broken down into individual skills and examples made it easy for them to change the way they interacted with *each other*. They modeled the behavior that would give kids a huge advantage in life, they started using a shared language of "friend-making skills," and they quickly started creating their own activities with their cabin groups.

It may not yet be a complete "cookbook," but it's a terrific catalyst for change in a very positive way.

-- Gary Forster

"**Building Friendships**," and her newest book, "**Outnumbered, Not Outsmarted! - An A to Z Guide to Working with Kids and Teens in Groups**" are available at www.advantagebooks.net/