

The Camp Counselor: The Mentor

Excerpts from: Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed. *Letters From my Campers: A Counselor's Guide to Mentoring Youth*

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Many bemoan what they see today as a lack of true heroes to seed healthy physical, social, and emotional growth of children. Yet, the anecdotal and statistical evidence say otherwise. Heroes do exist – and you are, or can be, among them. Young people very much want the active involvement of caring adults and young adults in their lives and reap many significant benefits from those relationships they would be hard to quantify.



- Stephen Wallace

What does a mentor look like?

- Trustworthy
- Caring
- Understanding
- Respectful
- Helpful
- Dependable
- Fun
- Compassionate
- Responsible
- A Good Listener

How do I become a mentor?

1. Prepare

Ask lots of questions about your role at camp: what is my role, how will I be interacting with the campers, what is camp's expectations of me, who are the campers I will be working with?

Here is a list of what parents have told us they want from you:

- Have a sense of humor
- Clarify expectations
- Be relaxed
- Be a good role model
- Show leadership
- Have fun with their kids
- Model responsible behavior
- Discourage foul play
- Teach fair play
- Supervise for safety
- Show a knowledge of each camper
- Be fair to all campers
- Encourage campers to try new things
- Foster self-confidence
- Be patient
- Be vigilant



Here is a list of what campers want from camp:

- Have fun
- Make friends
- Feel good about themselves



They want to form meaningful relationships with you! Remember that relationship building begins when the child first arrives at camp – and so does the chance to help that child grow. Michael Pastore, author of *Dynamite Counselors Don't Explode*, suggest that the first moment you meet a camper is one of the most important moments of the summer. Why? Because the child will immediately answer some important questions: Do you care about me? Are you on my side? Are we going to work and play together as equal partners and best friends? From day one, moment one – you are on duty! Construct your relationships with great care, for they will determine your success as a camp counselor.

2. Prepare

Practice good communication skills, good role modeling, and good leadership. Put them into practice!

Communication Skills – Here are some basic guidelines:

- Praise your campers – even for the little things!
- Spend time with each camper
- Learn how to listen actively – paraphrase and repeat back to them what you “heard” them tell you
- Share your own stories – model good communication skills
- Read between the lines, as campers may not always immediately tell us what they are thinking of feeling
- Respect what your campers have to say, even if you disagree
- Remember to tell them you care about them!
- Give feedback, both positive and constructively critical



Role Modeling
A role model is somebody one looks up to.

Being a good role model may seem to be an obvious attribute of an accomplished camp counselor. But it may be easier said than done. After all, what exactly is a role model and how do you become one?

“Be the change you want to see in the world.” -Ghandi



What does it look like to be a role model?

- Never compromise your integrity
- Tell your kids how terrific they are and that you trust them
- Laugh a lot. A good sense of humor cures almost all of life's ills.
- Practice empathy. Try to see things from other people's point of view.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."
- Don't be afraid to say, "I made a mistake."
- Don't ever underestimate the power of words to heal.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I'm sorry."
- Learn to show cheerfulness, even when you don't feel like it.

Leadership

Being a good leader is a great way to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with your campers.

What does it look like to be a good leader?

- Be generous (benevolent)
- Be fair (just)
- Be respectful of others' dignity (humble)
- Be responsible (self-accountable)
- Be honest (truthful)

3. Personalize

You can maximize your mentoring efforts by personalizing your relationship with each camper by learning and communicating about their interests, strengths, goals, concerns, and plans for the future. Help them achieve a positive Sense of Self, encouraging them to take positive risks, and by recognizing their important rites of passage.

What is Sense of Self?



It refers to a young person's self-evaluated progress on three important developmental tasks: attaining a stable sense of identity (Who am I?); establishing some degree of independence from parents; establishing healthy relationships with peers. Research from Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) tells us that young people with a high Sense of Self more often report feeling smart, successful, responsible, and confident than their

lost Sense of Self counterparts do. They also more frequently refer to positive relationships with their parents and say they avoid alcohol and other drugs.

You can help!

- ✓ Reflect back to your campers whom you see them to be (friendly, outgoing, hard worker, etc.)
- ✓ Reinforce their independence at camp by commenting on their ability to be self-directed, to make positive choices and accept responsibility for personal behavior, to express confidence in their own abilities to succeed in camp activities and with peers, to explore new opportunities, to contribute positively to the camp community, and to ask for help when they need it.
- ✓ Facilitate the construction of meaningful, mutually caring, and respectful relationships with peers.
- ✓ Promote play and encourage everyone's participation
- ✓ Praise campers
- ✓ Encourage campers to take positive risks
- ✓ Create opportunities for positive risk-taking. More research from SADD reveals that young people who take positive risks are 20% more likely to avoid destructive behaviors than those who do not. They are also more likely to describe themselves in positive terms and to say they often feel happy.

Who they become...



Studies have demonstrated the powerful role of mentors, documenting evidence of improved school work, better relationships with parents and other children, reduced acts of violence, and lower rates of alcohol and drug use. According to SADD, young people who identify at least one influential "natural" mentor in their life report that they have a higher Sense of Self and are more likely to take risks that affect their lives positively. The study also points out that the breadth and depth of mentoring – the number of mentors teens have or the range of topics they can discuss with a mentor – significantly

influences decisions young people make around drinking, drug use and sex.

Research from SADD points out that young people themselves rank counselors as some of the most influential people in their lives! So, what are you waiting for????? Become a mentor at QUEST and make a difference in the lives of young people this summer!