

# **Camp Means Feeling Good, Belonging, and Contributing**

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**Why do parents send their children to camp? We know from surveys that parents who send their kids to camp for the first time, usually say that they are sending their children to camp to provide them with good day care. The parents of experienced campers usually say they send their kids to camp to have fun. But all parents know that a healthy camp experience is more than just fun, or good child care. Camp is a place where children grow in important ways. Children should leave camp feeling really good about themselves. They should feel that camp is a place where they really belong. And they should leave with a stronger sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.**

**Camps provide the kind of environment that is increasingly difficult to find in our competitive and individualistic society. There is nothing wrong with a little healthy competition, but schools often do a much better job teaching skills than they do teaching children to have confidence in themselves. In school children can fail, and where there is too much emphasis on grades some children inevitably find themselves on the bottom. Camps do not give grades, and good camps do not allow children to "choose sides." Mature counselors know that children who are taught new skills, and who can exercise those skills in a noncompetitive environment gain confidence and self esteem.**

**Children cannot grow up to be happy and accomplished adults without self-esteem, and self-respect. But these cannot be given to children. Children, like adults, earn self-esteem through their own accomplishments. Whether the activity involves printing a good picture taken in a camp photography program, or making a solid hit in softball, children at camp have a wonderful opportunity to accomplish tasks that they value. And in doing so they gain confidence in their own abilities and self-esteem.**

**Grades can be destructive, but not simply because they make invidious or unfavorable comparisons between children. They can also be destructive because they only provide children with extrinsic motivation. The often excessive emphasis on grades in school sends a very clear message. Work hard, not because what you are doing is valuable in and of itself, but because if you work hard you will get an extrinsic reward—a good grade. In a good camp program children learn to achieve and gain self confidence at the same time that they learn to love activities for their own sake. And children who learn to love activities for their own intrinsic value are more likely to grow up to be happy and productive human beings.**

**A good camp is also a place where children feel they are members of a caring community. This need to belong is often forgotten in our society. As they grow up children who do not feel they belong are likely to join gangs, religious cults, and other destructive groups. But where in our society can children join groups that provide good role models and give children this important sense of belonging? Many children become active in their parents' churches and synagogues, religious youth groups, the boy scouts and girl scouts, and in their schools' service organizations. But I would bet that for many adults camp provided the most meaningful and positive group experience of their youth. The reason for this is not surprising. Children spend weeks at a time at camp while they often participate in other youth groups just in the afternoon, or on weekends. Credit should also be given to the outstanding people who work at many camps—people work at camps because they enjoy children, not because it is a highly lucrative form of summer employment.**

**It is probably hard to find an educational brochure that does not assure parents that School X or Camp Y is devoted to the development of each child's unique interests and abilities. This**



philosophical commitment is very important, but parents should remember that an educational institution is only as good as the people who work with their children. Adolescents, especially adolescent males, may see children as little competitors, or as little problems to be controlled. Mature adults see children as small people with their own unique abilities and desires. Most adolescents readily learn how to understand and deal with children. But this is best accomplished in an apprenticeship relationship where they work directly under the close supervision of older people who really know and enjoy working with children. Good camps provide this kind of leadership for their younger counselors.

Good counselors also know that a counselor is the leader of a group. In this respect counselors have a responsibility that goes well beyond the normal responsibilities of teachers. Teachers are usually required to teach a defined curriculum, and often the evaluation of their performance is based almost entirely upon how successfully they teach this curriculum. Little attention is paid to the quality of each child's group experience. Successful camps have been successful in large measure because they do focus on the quality of each child's group experience. A camp is truly a caring community only when its campers are taught that every child deserves to be treated with respect, encouraged, and is in turn expected to contribute to the welfare of the entire group. Campers feel that they truly belong when their group counselors care about them and expect each member of the group to care about their fellow campers. Here again there is no substitute for the presence of mature and caring adult counselors.

Parents often ask camp directors what their camper/counselors ratios are, and how old their counselors are. The standards for these important criteria are established by state boards of health. Unfortunately in many states, including New York, the staffing requirements of public camps are not regulated by the Board of Health. Consequently, public facilities (especially town camps) often have much younger counselors than agency and private camps. This is one of the reasons that town camps are so inexpensive.

Even where camps are required to meet state standards you may feel that these standards are inadequate. In New York State, for example, the Board of Health requires that half of a camp's staff must be over eighteen years old. In practice this often means that most of the older counselors in camp are only eighteen, nineteen, or perhaps twenty. Counselors who are this young should be very carefully supervised by mature adults.

Campers should leave camp at the end of the summer with greater confidence in their own abilities, a desire to achieve, the feeling of security that comes from belonging to a real community of friends, and a greater awareness of their responsibility to others. The popularity of camping today is due in large measure to the success that camps have had in achieving these goals. When parents say "I loved my camp experience," these are the things they often value most. And when kids say "Camp was fun," they truly feel that they have grown at camp. Camps provide child care, and they are fun, but most fortunately they also provide a wonderful environment for child development.

Written for Bergen County Kids

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