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# Why Camp Counselors Can Out-Parent Parents

By [MICHAEL THOMPSON](#)

Are you having trouble getting your 9-year-old daughter to make her bed every day? How about your 11-year-old son? Does he get up in the morning and run down to the dining room to set the breakfast table for the family? And after breakfast, does he clear the dishes and wipe down the table? He doesn't? Sorry to hear that. (Neither did mine.)

And while I'm at it, may I ask about video games? Texting? Do your children get angry and stubborn when you ask them to shut off their electronics at dinner time or when it is time for bed? Lots of parents have told me that the turn-off-the-video-games confrontations can be tougher to handle than the turn-off-the-TV moments.

Whether the issue is chores or screens, at times like these we question our own parenting: have we spoiled our children? Do they lack discipline ... or do we? Should we emulate the focus of the tiger moms? Why can't we raise our bon b  b  s with the natural authority of French parents? Why is it that our children, by the age of 8 or 9, have tired of our commands and our advice? We must look ourselves in the mirror and ask: What should we be doing differently? Time to buy more parenting books!

As a so-called "parenting expert," I am struck by how often American parents think that the answer to their parenting dilemmas is for them to do more, or better, or to do something differently. I disagree. I often believe parents should do less, and should sometimes take themselves out of the picture, especially in the summer, when it's easy to stop battling and turn some of the toughest parenting challenges over to 20- and 21-year-olds who can perform magic with their children.

College-age students possess a completely different kind of authority than do parents, and they put it to good use getting children to set tables, make beds, keep track of their clothes, take showers, take turns and, more important, take risks and accept challenges that would melt parents into a puddle of anxious empathy. These young adults often teach complex, challenging life-and-death skills: sailing, horseback riding, rock climbing, whitewater kayaking and survival techniques. They also teach character and community, caring and sacrifice. And they do it all in an environment free of electronics: summer camp.

Why is it that these young people pay such close attention to counselors who are actually just a few years older than they are? How can these counselors, so young and relatively inexperienced with children (though they have far more training than in the past), get campers to do things without a struggle that are often an occasion for tears and tantrums at home?

In his masterwork, "Childhood and Society," Erik Erikson reminds us that not all learning comes from "systematic instruction." In preliterate societies and in non-literate pursuits, he points out, "much is learned from adults who become teachers by dint of gift and inclination rather than by appointment and *perhaps the greatest amount is learned from older children* (italics are mine)."

Children love to learn, but they get tired of being taught by adults. Children want to learn from older children, and, at a camp that means older campers, C.I.T.'s (counselors in training) and camp counselors. They want to live with them, emulate them, absorb them. In our age-segregated society, camp is the only place in America where an 11-year-old can get the sustained attention of a 19-year-old. In return for the attention of these "older children," campers will make sacrifices. They will follow all kinds of rules and adhere to all kinds of rituals that they would likely fight at home.

When children return home from camp, parents are amazed. "She is so grown-up," they observe. "He is so responsible!" a startled father exclaims. "He cleans up after himself." Another mother, amazed at her child's growth in only a month, remarks, "He tries so many new foods!"

There's just no contest between parents and counselors. The college students are vastly better looking than we are; they are truly cool and they have dazzling skills. When children need a summer filled with growth and change (not to mention fun and glory), I tell their parents to give camp a chance.

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