

## **HELP! I'M A FIRST TIME COUNSELOR!!**

### **1. Packing**

- See the ultimate packing list at the bottom of this document
- Talk to directors about their policies (things you can't have at camp) each camp may be different
- Find out about sleeping quarters- do you have your "own" space or do you share living space with the campers at all times. This will make a HUGE difference in what you bring.

### **2. Crucial moments**

Before campers arrive

- If you have access to files, go over them and mark down important information. Such as fears, allergies, or anything you think is notable. It might help to go through the files with a more experienced staff member if you're not sure what's "notable".

First day

- YOU are a campers first impression of camp... make it a positive one! Arrival time can be stressful for both campers and staff, try not to let campers see if you are feeling frustrated or overwhelmed, keep an eye out for shy or nervous campers. You can make a huge difference just by sitting next to a lonely child.
- This is a good time to get the campers to put their names on bunks, it will help you learn and remember their names and gives them something to do while they're waiting for the rest of their cabin to arrive.
- Once everyone arrives have a "cabin talk" make a list of rules with the campers. If you let them come up with the rules or guidelines, they are more likely to follow and enforce them. You can always change what they say so that it is positive. For example, Jimmy says "don't steal peoples stuff" you can say "Awesome... respect each others property" and that is what you write down. Once you finish the rules, it is a good idea to post them in a visible place, like next to the door, that way it is a constant reminder.
- This is also a good time to have the "bathroom" talk. If you tell the campers upfront that they can come to you if they have an accident and that you will take care of it discretely, they are more likely to tell you if it does happen. If you have teen groups coming in, do not skip that conversation because teens sometimes have accidents too, and it is much harder for them to admit it.
- You can use this time to find out a little about your campers, who's new or returning, what they're excited about or what new things they want to try. The best tip I ever received as a new counselor is to find out what everyone likes the best or is looking forward to the most and make note of it. That way, later on if a camper is homesick, you can remind them of those things and if you have to take time off of an activity, those are the things you choose.

### **3. Discipline – How, When, Why?**

- Do not yell. First, it is not nice being yelled at... you wouldn't want someone yelling at you, so don't yell at your campers. You're human, you can get frustrated at times, but yelling will only make things worse. Two things can happen, either it turns into a game where your campers will TRY to make you

yell, or they'll just stop paying attention, if someone was yelling at you all of the time, would you be eager to listen to them? Nope! (Plus, there is a good chance that you will end up having an unwanted discussion with your director- no director wants their campers to be unhappy and scared because of a grumpy counselor)

- If you have to take time off an activity, use something they want to be doing. If you take time off swimming from a camper who hates the water then that will not have much of an impact.
- "Match the punishment to the crime." If a camper is frustrated and throws their stuff around the cabin, don't take their entire hour of swim away. Get them to stay behind for 5 minutes to clean up the mess they made.
- Try to make it right away and not a few hours/days later. If loses its meaning if you wait too long and you and the camper may forget why they were even in trouble.
- Make sure to follow through. Don't make empty threats and make sure your co-counselor knows who's sitting out, for what, and how long.
- Choose your battles
- If you are having trouble with a camper or cabin, sometimes a fresh face can make a huge difference. Ask a co-staff to step in so you can take a quick break to compose yourself. And the campers might respond better to someone else too.
- Good cop/bad cop approach is not always fair. It is hard to always be the "bad cop" and campers can often see through this.
- Your directors are there to help you, ask for advice or help with a situation.
- Keep your senior staff informed about any issues you're having with a camper or cabin. They may have to step in.
- Never tell a camper that he or she is being sent home. Only the director can make that call, and it is the director's responsibility to inform the camper of his or her decision.

#### **4. Homesickness – you and your campers.**

##### **Campers**

- Sometimes campers say they are sick, when in reality they are homesick; sometimes homesickness can cause a physical reaction in people, causing them to actually become ill.
- Don't try to just distract a homesick camper. Talk to them about why they want to go home, is it their first time away? Are they afraid of the dark? Once you figure out what's wrong, you can help them fix it. But don't dwell on the situation, have a conversation, let them know that their feels are valid and move on.
- Remind them of all the great things coming up later in the week
- Get them to write a letter to their parent or guardian rather than calling home.
- Let your director or senior staff know if it is an ongoing problem, you don't want to ruin the camper's first experience at camp.
- Also, sometimes kids who are being bullied will say they are homesick instead of admitting that they are unhappy because of a bully. Keep an eye out for that. (A proactive approach to bullying is the best way to avoid this, know what's going on with your campers, spend time with them and TALK to them)

## Counselors

- Find out about living situation and breaks before camp
- Buy a calling card (or bring your cell phone, but **ONLY** use it during your free time.
- Be honest and upfront about your quirks and hang-ups; don't like people using your toothpaste? Tell your co staff before it becomes an issue!
- Bring stuff that reminds you of home, stuffed animals, familiar blanket, photos, anything that will make you comfortable. (Check with your camp about what you can bring)
- Do not participate in camp gossip... it can make for a loooong summer.

### 5. **Lead by example – in every way!!**

- Campers are smart; they'll call you on trying to pull a power trip. "Because I'm the counselor" just doesn't work. Explain your reasons behind your rules and decisions. They will respect you more if you're straight with them.
- Wear appropriate clothes i.e. raingear, clothes that follow the camp dress code and **ALWAYS** wear sunscreen!
- Take care of yourself. Eat and **SLEEP!!** If you're not taking care of yourself, how are you supposed to take care of 12 other people?
- If you want your campers to do something, you should do it with them, if you tell them to clean their bunk, yours should already be clean, this goes for things you tell them **NOT** to do as well.
- Most camps have a policy on staff "fraternizing"; if it is not covered in training, ask your director what your camp's policy is. If you are allowed to date at camp, you should be **VERY** discreet about it. Campers **SHOULD NOT** be able to tell that staff are dating. Be respectful of other people on your team as well, act appropriately and use good judgment.

### 6. **Communication is KEY!**

- Talk to your co staff. Let them know what sets you off and what you're really great at, find out the same about them, that way you can play off of each others strengths and help each other improve your weaknesses.
- Be open with directors and senior staff – if something is bothering you, let them know (in an appropriate way). If you have suggestions, they would probably love to hear them. Your director is there to help you and they want you to be successful.
- Do not be afraid to ask for help

### 7. **A clean camp is a happy camp!**

- Make sure that your campers wash daily and change their clothes daily.
- Have them put away their clothes every time they change. This prevents them from losing things.
- Make sure that kids change out of swimsuits!
- Have a clean outfit for the last day, or any big event like a dance or ceremony (that goes for you and your campers)
- If a camper has an accident, make sure to wash everything right away.

- Help kids with chores – counseling is NOT a spectator sport! And campers will start to resent you if you are sitting down relaxing while they are cleaning.
- Assign jobs to keep it fair. Too many campers and not enough jobs? Break the jobs down; divide a floor into 4 sections for 4 campers to sweep and 4 campers to mop. Instead of having 2 people do the work, you have 8 people helping, and it will get done much faster!

#### 8. **We're bored! Now what?**

- Sometimes between activities or during “down time” campers may complain that they're bored. Be aware – boredom can quickly turn into homesickness. This is where your notebook comes in handy (see ultimate packing list). I always filled my book with brainteasers, jokes and quick game ideas, otherwise known as “back pocket games”. Back pocket games are great time fillers and can be played anywhere.
- Always have something planned for rainy days, ‘cabin activities’ can include making bracelets or reading from one of the books you brought with you (see ultimate packing list)
- Get suggestions from the kids, sometimes they may just want to ‘hang out and chat’ but make sure that you're there hanging out with them and that the conversation is appropriate.

#### 9. **Safety vs. Fun... find the balance.**

- The general rule I like to follow is ‘if you're not sure, don't do it!!’ If you think of an activity or game that you would like to try, check with someone in charge first. There may be a reason why it's not already programmed into the day.
- If you put the camper's safety first, then fun is sure to follow. There is nothing that ruins a game faster than an injured camper.
- Explain to campers why they can't do something. If you explain that running on a wet field will get them wet, dirty and possibly hurt, their much more likely to understand than if you say something like “because I said so” or “those are the rules”

#### 10. **What if they don't like me?**

- The main thing to remember is that you do not need to be the campers *buddy* you have enough of those. You want them to see you as a *friend*, someone they can trust and rely on. But it is important to understand that although it is great to be silly and fun, you still have to be the adult and set limits.
- Campers will sometimes tell you that they don't like you or say they like another counselor better. Don't let this get to you, if you are kind, understanding and fair, the campers will like and respect you. Even if they don't always show it.

## ULTIMATE PACKING LIST

So there's the obvious stuff, toiletries (nothing too smelly... mosquitoes!), shorts, t-shirts, tank tops, long pants, sweaters, rain gear, sandals, sneakers, swimsuit and towel. Bring extra of all of these because you are going to need it.

You will probably receive a list from your camp of all those things. The rest of the list is purely suggestions from experienced staff.

A lot of it is just to make your life at camper easier, and to make your breaks/time off more enjoyable.

Don't bring anything really valuable because you always run the risk of ruining or losing your things and make sure that everything you bring is appropriate for camp.

<p>           Sharpies            Stickers            Envelopes            Stamps            Paper            Pens            Markers  <b>Booklet</b> (small enough to carry)            Money            Clothes for days off/breaks            Makeup            Cd's            Movies            Posters/photographs            Comforter            Stuffed animal            Shower shoes            Shower caddy            Watch (water proof)  <b>Lots and lots of socks</b>            Reusable water bottle            Treats (other than camp food)            Calling card            Laundry basket/bag  <b>Lanyard and whistle</b>            Camera            Extra batteries for camera         </p>	<p> <b>Swiss Army Knife</b> (For out trips, but check with your director before bringing this to camp!)            Sunscreen (the spf 400 stuff at camp is a lot like glue)  <b>Duct tape</b>            Costume stuff            Alarm clock            Fan            Small book bag (for times when you don't want to bring your huge pack)            Glow sticks (be careful... can be harmful.. don't break open!!)            Books (You probably won't have much time to read, but bringing books to read with/to your campers is nice. I recommend "Chicken soup" books)            Comic books for homesick campers or campers who can't sleep  <b>Toque</b>            Wipes or sanitizer (travel pack kind)            Dryer sheets (because you probably won't be doing laundry that often)            Playing cards            Some white stuff for tie dying            Hats or bandanas         </p>
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