



Building a Camp That Builds Friendships

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There's really only one reason kids will want to return to your camp. Friends. And some basic facility improvements will help make that happen on purpose.

We spend way too much time keeping campers busy in activities. Not that having new stuff every year isn't valuable, or making camp "fun" isn't a worthy goal. But by themselves neither will bring your campers back. "Fun," as it turns out, is a commodity; like milk. Kids can get it from a lot of different places, and one "fun" can be pretty much like another.

"Blasphemy!" you say. "Our evaluation forms all say kids love the fun at our camp!" Yes, and they love the fun at other camps, too. And they love playing X-Box and hanging out at the mall. Ask the campers who returned for a second year or more 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.

That was pretty much true for decades. But in our effort to be safer at camps, 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 use to sit and talk 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.

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. But 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 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.

Marc Gravitz, a renown facilitator visited my course and said, "If a challenge course activity has been successful, the debriefing time may last twice as long as the event itself. But looking at your course, how would I know that was the goal?" We had no specific places for the debriefing to take place. Taking Marc's advice, we added circles of benches near each challenge-course activity. The participants were eager to have a place to sit, and the circle automatically kept everyone involved. As a result, our instructors could sense when the discussion in the group was more important than going on to the next challenge. Overnight people began to treat each other differently. When they got back to the dining hall they couldn't stop talking. They'd learned about each other, and they were becoming friends.



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.

How's this apply to your camp? Let's take a tour, starting with your cabins. Is there anywhere in your cabins where kids can play cards? (Four kids don't fit on one bunk). How about a small picnic table in the middle of the room, or on the porch? Is there time during the day when they could sit around it and play cards or checkers? Just imagine if every cabin had one of those "Crackerbarrel Country Store" big carpet checkerboards and a deck of cards. Kids would be making friends, just like YOU did when you were a kid, or in college.

Where do kids line up and wait at your camp? Outside the dining hall? At the Trading Post? Outside the pool or waterfront? If you had picnic tables there kids could be facing each other, sitting as cabin groups, sharing snacks and stories and laughs. Every picnic table is a clubhouse with a hundred uses. Drill a hole in it and add an umbrella and it looks like a resort!



Compare your camp web site to "resort" web sites. Most of those sites aimed at adults will have an almost identical picture of two Adirondack

chairs facing a great, relaxing view. You can just see yourself sitting in one of those chairs and talking with someone, can't you? So where are those chairs at your camp? Don't your campers don't think of camp as their summer vacation? They don't want a break from the hectic pace of school? Just look at some of the accompanying photos of camps who have added "gathering spots" around camp and you know instinctively how they'll be used.

Did you play kickball or baseball as a kid? You know one reason they're so popular? Because you spend half the time watching the game and talking to the other kids on your team! But what *your* camp probably doesn't have are the dugout benches where that can happen. (Again, you can't beat picnic tables; and an igloo cooler of water makes it a natural gathering area. To make it perfect, put it in the shade – trees if you've got them, or a vinyl-tent "carport" if you don't. It's not the game that makes the friendships, it's the time *talking* about the game with new friends that makes it a lasting memory.



One of the best friend-making activities of all time is four-square. Only four kids are on the court, but dozens more can be in a line circling them waiting their turn.

They're commenting on the game, learning the rules and techniques, telling stories, idolizing mentors and inspiring young ones. Each camper village, and every "waiting" area should have at least one four-square court and ball-holder where staff get the game started any spare minute.



Why talk about these things this time of year? Because it's the perfect time to build them! The fall is especially perfect for getting volunteers and alumni out to camp for work days. The weather's great, camp looks good, the bugs are leaving, and you've got leftover food you can feed them! None of these things are particularly expensive. A donation from a board member, volunteer or parent of \$100 is enough to build a picnic table with their name routed on it.

But if you put it off until next summer, you're likely to be too busy to get around to it, and your campers will again have fun without the lasting friendships that make the memories last... and invite them to return to your camp year after year.

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The Eight Hallmarks of Great Camps

- **A Beautiful outdoor setting** – Camp is a chance to bring some simplicity back to our lives, to gain a first personalized understanding of God the creator, and to be faced with challenges to make decisions that matter. The natural world provides an almost “fool-proof” place to create new memories, gain a new vocabulary of experiences, and new friends to share them with. We have a responsibility to use this tool by deliberately programming kids in beautiful places. Mom said it best, “Go outside and play!” Too often camping professionals keep campers indoors, and design camps that look like we forgot the original reason people love us... the beauty of nature.
- **A respect for history and tradition** – We are standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us; whose generosity and wisdom lift us up to new heights, and give us the confidence to try for even greater things. We’re lucky that people *like* things “country” or “cabin” or “western” style. Kids crave the adventure; adults the simplicity. All value the sense of character and values of a time-gone-by. But most important, traditions and rituals join kids and staff to something larger than themselves: membership in an exclusive club that sometimes snickers at the outside world! Their cabin-group, their “not-a-parent” counselor, their *Camp*. It’s the sought-after feeling of *belonging*.
- **A great Vision** – Big dreams aren’t happenstance, they first have to be formed, and shared to gain the trust of those who can help make them happen. Not just “better” but a vision that reflects a greater purpose, and a legacy to future generation. That may include inspiring facilities that hope to facilitate great things, and annual support so that inability to pay doesn’t deny attendance. But just as important are the smallest details that can stir great emotion and lasting memories.
Who are the “keepers of the flame” of the great YMCA camps?
 - It could be the executive, the camp director, or the metro CEO. Good supervision, training, and encouragement starts up high. But camps that have remained great have done so because of people of vision at all levels: counselors, alumni, board members. People with initiative accomplish great things. Those looking for excuses will always find them.
 - Great camp executives and camp directors are an integral part of their camp community. Their maturity and vision are critical to the overall success.
 - They focus on a full, growing summer camp *first*, before other expansion.
 - Above all, they are empathetic to parents, campers and staff. They strive to satisfy. And mom is their #1 customer.
 - Wise camp leaders reinvest surplus resources (time, money) into increasing the effectiveness of programming and the quality of the camper/guest experience; and into increasing the efficiency of operation (reducing overhead and operating costs.) “Make hay while the sun shines.” If you can’t reinvest when times are good, the next economic downturn or other crisis could be fatal.
- **Well chosen, well-supported Leadership.** The single most important component of success, and the most distinguishing factor of the YMCA’s success over the years. We do a pretty fair job of staff selection, but a weaker job of ongoing support. We all need to listen more, and guide our young leaders in learning to make their own decisions. It is each leader’s responsibility to “pay forward” the blessings we received from those who

invested in our own learning. We learned as a result of being given responsibilities and being held accountable. We were rewarded with praise for our first successes. We were reprimanded when we made mistakes, and encouraged to learn from them. A great camp, like other great learning institutions, “grows its own” future leaders.

- **A partnership with parents.** Kids aren’t the customer, and “fun” isn’t our only goal. (95% of all camp registration cards are signed by the same person: “mom”). When the YMCA asked parents what they look for when choosing a camp, their answers in order of importance were:

- 1) Safety
- 2) High-quality, well-trained staff/ role-models.
- 3) Increased self respect through skill development
- 4) New, and *better*, friends.
- 5) Fun.

Yet photos in our brochures and web sites don’t reflect these priorities at all.

Where do our new campers come from? 85% come from the referrals of friends, neighbors and relatives. Yet we do nothing to support that “word of mouth” sales force. After we give kids a terrific summer experience, we’re lousy at communicating that to their parents. To have lasting effect, that should be part of our job, too.

- **A focus on the building of friendships.**

It’s not the activities that the kids do here that brings them back. It’s the chance to create friendships with other children, and especially with the college-age staff.

Do we plan relationship-building into our activities?

Relationships *can* happen accidentally, but it’s too important to be left to chance.

Build it in to the equipment, the facilities, the schedule, and the culture.

A progression of program experiences can help entice campers to return year after year. (New activities aren’t for the new kids; they’re for the returning kids.) But “fun” is a commodity with lots of competition. Friendships are rare, and worth coming back for.

- **Well maintained facilities that facilitate good program and sustain high performance.** Not really a separate habit in itself, but a tool that impacts many of the others: For parents, the facilities act as the visual indicator of the quality and safety of the camp. For campers and staff, it’s one way they judge how they are respected by adults. We can add character and learning to every day at camp. Facilities can frustrate the forming of new friendships, or foster them. They may not be the *message* of the memories, but they often are the *catalyst*.

- **An open acknowledgement of the importance of God in our lives.**

For any of this world to make sense, for us to understand the meaning of life and our place in it, we have to understand the spiritual connection we have to each other. At great camps faith is made visible.

We do this through showing the place faith has in our daily lives, through prayers at meals, inspirational thoughts and stories, character lessons, and evening devotions. But also through the esteem we show for international staff, and how they bring us all closer together; how we show and practice patriotism; how we learn to be stewards of the earth; how often we give thanks; and how we express love.