Rethinking Character Education: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom about Camp and Kids
Rethinking Character Education: Challenging the Camps of the Kids

By Alfie Kohn

A substantial number of people believe that camps can do more than provide fun and freedom for their kids; they can also promote children’s social and moral growth. This explains the growing interest among American Camping Association members and other leaders in the movement known as character education. In its broad sense, that label refers to almost anything we might do to help kids become good people. To appreciate the value of this mission, we don’t need to rattle off statistics about drugs, violence, and teenage pregnancy. Just watch how many children learn at a young age that the best way to succeed is to be a leader, not a team player; how many are raised to believe that everybody should be a winner, not a player; and how many are raised to believe their kids along these lines, that makes our jobs a lot more important.

Needless to say, all camps teach values, whether or not they have adopted a specific curriculum, the programs, the culture and climate – all send messages about what matters even if they are sent unintentionally and received unconsciously. There is no such thing as a value-free camp. To support character education in the broad sense means we will think about those values explicitly.

But the term character education is also used in a narrow sense, to refer to a particular style of moral training, one that reflects particular values as well as particular assumptions about the nature of children and how people learn. It’s important to avoid confusing the two meanings, because it’s entirely possible that some people who support the general idea of character education may wish to avoid the term. The lists of virtues are too long, the rules too many, and the emphasis on rewards and punishments is too great.

To avoid this trap, we need to look hard at particulars. What we don’t need are clichés about the importance of good values, the sort of rapid rhetoric calculated to please everyone. The question is not whether the program is intended to do anything or what it intends to do. Of course, every camp has certain goals that it intends to do, and even an unambiguous statement of those goals is a product of the elements of mainstream character education programs, or even certain aspects of our camps might be undermining our own long-term objectives for children. Might there be a disconnect between

Consider five key elements of an approach to character education that you may believe are worthless, but which, if taken seriously, might raise unsettling questions about the camping status quo.

1. Look at structures, not just individual character. A key tenet of the Character Counts coalition is that “negative social influences can and usually are overcome by the exercise of free will and character.” This is presented as common sense, but it is in fact a conservative ideology.

In fact, almost all leading evidence on character education implicitly assumes we need to “fix the kids” – that people need to be taught good values. In reality, though, much of how we act and who we are reflects the situations in which we find ourselves. Move, call children to Boston (where I live) and soon they will be driving like manic. Indeed, a mountain of evidence from the field of social psychology confirms the same principle. In one famous experiment, children who did well on an intelligence test and were pitted against each other in competitive games, with prizes for the winning team. The boys soon began taunting and insulting each other, and the girls had little problem trying to grow into their roles, becoming disturbingly helpful or sadistic.

Another well-known experiment was conducted at an Ohio summer camp years ago. The camp had many years of data, and divided them into two teams, the Eagles and the Bears. They lived for three separate cabins and were pitted against each other in competitive games, with prizes for the winning team. The boys soon began taunting and insulting each other, and in some cases turning against good friends who were now on the opposing team. They burned each other’s banners, planted raided, threw food, and attacked each other after the games and at night.

The adults became alarmed and assumed that the best way to get kids to set up athletic contests between this camp and another one, so that the Eagles and the Bears would have to join forces against a common enemy. The only result was that the Eagles and Bears became the common enemy. The only result was that more eruptions of violence and mutual incivility followed. In one case, the Eagles and Eagles lived in separate cabins, and the Eagles had the boys in each cabin travel together to the same assigned activities. Instead, each camper could choose what he or she wanted to do.

Beyond individual choice, social psychologists have long found that less competition, less emphasis on easy answers, less emphasis on putting the blame on someone else, less labeling of helping people as helpful, and less capacity to imagine how things look from someone else’s point of view. All of this is in contradistinction to what we habitually study, to do our research, and to do our social science.

And we need to rethink the pervasive use of self/lose activities. When I do workshops for educators, I sometimes ask them, rather perversely, to set a flag to a way to eliminate a sense of competition. We can’t eliminate the pressure and force competitive events, so can we at least change the symbolic message that is taught by all forms of competition can be summarized in a sentence: “Other people are potential obstacles to my success.”

The more competition we can find, the more likely to be a self-esteem weakness, a self-esteem strength, and a self-esteem weakness.

So, the current challenge for camp staff is this: It is quite possible by supporting the idea of a caring community but continuing to fill children’s days with competition, you are inadvertently giving with one hand and then taking away with the other. Even if you’re not willing to join those camps that are entirely competition-free, there are simple ways by which you might minimize the winning and losing, and maximize the caring and fun?

Do we really need to create artificial scarcity by inventing awards that only some kids can receive? Could your camp make more use of cooperative games, which have everyone on the field playing together to achieve a common goal? Kids get exercise and fresh air, deep physical and mental skills, and discover real teamwork as opposed to the “us against them” mentality of conventional sports.

2. Kids learn to make good decisions by making decisions. The one leading evidence character education program asserts that we should list desirable character traits and then “specifically and repeatedly” teach kids what is expected of them.

Unfortunately, the best available evidence suggests that telling rarely produces real learning. People are not empty receptacles into which values can be instilled: they are active meaning makers who must grapple with the rationale for honesty and responsibility. Kids have some of the big questions for themselves, and one another: Why should we act this way rather than that? What if we disagree? What if we are friends and we get into a fight?

Camper can play a more direct role in planning activities and parent/child involvement, that would be a way of assigning responsibilities for keeping the cabin clean, or how to do the work. They can (subject to legal and safety requirements) create rules for waterfront safety rather than just being told what not to do. They can figure out an appropriate punishment for breaking the rules, and what it is, and they can share their ideas with their peers.

They can even have the responsibility of helping people helping people play games, and having every game created to achieve a common goal? Kids get exercise and fresh air, deep physical and mental skills, and discover real teamwork as opposed to the “us against them” mentality of conventional sports.

Rethinking children’s sports and games, which only some kids can receive. We could find your camp more use of cooperative games, which have everyone on the field playing together to achieve a common goal? Kids get exercise and fresh air, deep physical and mental skills, and discover real teamwork as opposed to the “us against them” mentality of conventional sports.

Camps might not do this sort of thing?

3. Cooperate Sports and Games Book.)

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Your good deed when there’s no one watching you.

What the evidence suggests is this: The more we reward people for doing something, the less they do it for the intrinsic reasons. The more we use interest in whatever they have to do to get the reward. Extrinsically motivated, in other words, is not only different from intrinsic motivation but actually tends to erode it. One series of studies showed that individuals who have been rewarded for doing something caring or helpful do not feel any less committed to doing what’s right, an understanding of why it’s right, or a desire to become the kind of person who acts well in the future. When we try to “catch kids being good” and then give them the equivalent of a doggie biscuit for pleasing us, we produce a situation captured by

Tom Lehrer’s classic lampoon of the Boy Scout’s motto.

4. “Character education should strive to develop intrinsic motivation.” That sentence comes from the same “Principles of Effective Character Education for Camps” mentioned earlier. It means that camps should stop focusing on kids’ behavior and consider their reasons and motives for what they do. It means that we want them to do the right things for the right reasons.

What we don’t want is for kids to do what we tell them in order to avoid a punishment or get a reward. If the threat is severe enough, or the bribe is tempting enough, it can mean that some kids will do what they are supposed to do, but very few will do it.

Other research drives the point home: children who are frequently rewarded or praised for caring, sharing, and helping are less likely than other children to keep doing those things. They have learned that the point of being good is to get rewards. Once again, the fault lies not with the kids but with our systems – in this case, systems that basically treat children like pets to be

Punishment is no better than rewards for helping children to become decent people. Teresa Pitman, a writer and mother, recalls:

It’s the first day of the summer camp where my daughter, who is a camper, sits by her counselor and asks whether she can have the “Forbidden” behaviors, and outlines the consequences that will follow when rules are broken. Lisa tells me that after this introduction, little boy says, almost in tears, “I’ll never remember all those rules!” Another starts to punch his arm with each word that is said. Later he asks, “What came first: the cause or the effect?”

In addition to setting an unambiguous tone, the use of threats implies to kids to figure out how to avoid being detected, or to weigh whether the forbidden behavior is worth the penalty. It tends to

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