

Rethinking Character Education:

Challenging the Conventional Wisdom About Camping & Kids

By Alfie Kohn

A substantial number of people believe that camps can do more than provide an opportunity to have fun: They can also promote children's social and moral growth.

This explains the growing interest among American Camping Association members 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 tender age not to be tender - or who assume that being successful means looking out for Number One.

Of course, parents have the primary responsibility in the area of values. But historically parents haven't been asked, nor should they be asked, to do it alone. Schools and camps, among other institutions, have a role to play. Put it this way: If parents are raising kids to be compassionate, responsible, ethical people, that makes our jobs a lot easier. If parents are not raising their kids along those lines, that makes our jobs a lot more important.

Needless to say, all camps teach values, whether or not they have adopted a specific program to that end. The rules (and who makes them), 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 just 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 find themselves turning by default to programs or organizations with a specific agenda - an agenda that, upon reflection, they might very well find objectionable.

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 vapid rhetoric calculated to please everyone. The question is not whether we think kids should be helped to grow as human beings. Of course we do. The question is what we intend to do about it, and - more to the point - whether it's possible that specific 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 our goals and our practices? If so, we'd have to summon the courage to reconsider some deep-rooted

ways of doing things in order to live up to our own stated ideals.

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

1. Assume the best about kids. Many of the leading theorists of character education take a rather dim view of children – and of human nature. The author of one popular book on the subject asserts that “most behavior problems are the result of sheer ‘willfulness’ on the part of children” – a statement of stunning cynicism. Another educator cited for his work in character education sees human nature as “mean, nasty, brutish, selfish, and capable of great cruelty and meanness. We have to hold a mirror up to the students and say, ‘This is who you are. Stop it.’”

Happily, research from several disciplines converges to cast doubt on this sour view of human beings, and on the view that children have to be forcibly civilized, with virtues essentially shoved down their throats. That doesn’t mean we’re left with a starry-eyed romanticism. It does mean, as I once argued in a book called *The Brighter Side of Human Nature*, that there’s good reason to believe that it is as natural for children to help as to hurt. If much of what goes by the name of character education grows out of a dark set of beliefs about people – especially very short people – then we need to evaluate these programs in light of their underlying assumptions.

2. 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 conservative ideology.

In fact, almost all brands of character education implicitly assume we need to “fix the kids”: the problem lies with individuals, who need to be taught good values. In reality, though, much of how we act and who we are reflect the situations in which we find ourselves. Move calm, courteous people to Boston (where I live) and soon they will be driving like maniacs. Indeed, a mountain of evidence from the field of social psychology confirms the same principle. In one famous experiment, for example, ordinary adults assigned to the roles of prisoners or guards in a mock jail soon began to grow into their roles, becoming disturbingly helpless or sadistic, respectively.

Another well-known experiment was conducted at an Oklahoma summer camp many years ago. Researchers took a group of normal 11- and 12-year-old boys and divided them into two teams, the Rattlers and the Eagles. They lived for three weeks in 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, in some cases turning against good friends who were now on the opposing team. They burned each other’s banners, planned raids, threw food, and attacked each other after the games and at night.

The adults became alarmed and assumed that the best remedy would be to set up athletic contests between this camp and another one, so that the Rattlers and Eagles would have to join forces against a common enemy. (This is a typical American response: competition proves destructive, so the solution must be . . . more competition.) It didn’t work. The only strategy that finally succeeded in reducing tensions was to bring the two teams together not to face a common enemy but a common problem: fixing things at camp that had broken.

The moral of this study is that the nastiness that developed in the camp was not due to a defect of personality or character, but to the structure of the camping experience in which they found themselves. Thus, helping kids to be good people may require us to transform that structure rather than trying to remake the children.

More specifically, this experiment speaks directly to one central feature of camp: the extent to which it is experienced as a “caring community.” The importance of that notion was affirmed in the “Principles of Effective Character Education for Camps,” adopted by the National Camp Executives Group in September 2002. However, it may be an example of an ideal affirmed by everyone but not always fully supported in practice. Maybe there’s room for more interdependent activities, where campers have to help one another to succeed. Maybe boys and girls are kept apart more than necessary. Maybe there’s room for more cross-age activities, in which older kids have regular, structured opportunities to play with, guide, and nurture younger kids.

And maybe we need to rethink the pervasive use of win/lose activities. When I do workshops for educators, I sometimes ask them, rather perversely, to figure out a way to eliminate a sense of community, to extinguish any feeling of belongingness and safety. The most common response I hear is that awards and competitive games would do the job nicely. After all, the central message taught by all forms of competition can be summarized in a sentence: “Other people are potential obstacles to my success.”

Small wonder that research consistently finds that setting kids against one another in contests leads to less trust, less accurate communication, less sensitivity, less likelihood of helping people in need, and less capacity to imagine how things look from someone else’s point of view. All of this is troubling to contemplate, particularly in a society so in thrall to the ideology of winning, but the implications of these data are unmistakable. The problem isn’t with individuals who need to be taught sportsmanship. The problem is with activities that stipulate that one child (or team) can succeed only if another fails.

Thus the critical question for camp staff: Is it possible that 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, are there 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, develop physical and mental skills, and discover real teamwork as opposed to the “us against them” mentality of conventional sports. (Among the many books filled with examples: Terry Orlick’s *Cooperative Sports and Games Book*.)

3. Kids learn to make good decisions by making decisions. One leading character education program asserts that we should list desirable character traits and then “specifically and repeatedly” tell children “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 compassion and responsibility. Kids have to make sense of the big questions for themselves, and with one another: Why should we act this way rather than that? What if we disagree? What if two virtues pull in opposite directions so that it’s hard to be, say, honest and compassionate at the same time?

Real character education, the kind likely to have an enduring effect, requires that kids hash out these issues – and, more generally, that they have multiple opportunities to make decisions rather than just following directions. That starts with individual choices. My second year as a camper was a lot more fun than my first, mostly because the camp director decided to stop making all the kids 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 and moral learning come from having children make decisions together — in cabin, unit, or even campwide meetings. Here they learn to listen, compromise, weigh alternatives, anticipate complications, search for consensus. This is character education — and democracy — at its finest, but it requires that we adults be willing to give up some control. (Could that explain why more camps don't do this sort of thing?)

Campers can play a more direct role in planning evening activities and parent visiting day. They can decide together what would be a fair way of assigning responsibilities for keeping the cabin clean, or even how the bunks are arranged. 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 equitable way to deal with care packages full of treats that are received by some campers and not others. In each case, it's not the solution they hammer out that matters; it's the process of hammering it out.

Counselors don't just sit back passively while this happens. They have a tricky role to play: it takes a lot more skill to facilitate democratic decision-making than to dictate. They may, for example, begin a session by asking returning campers to think about what went wrong during previous summers and how we can make things better this time. They may propose a goal — for example, that no one should feel excluded or ridiculed — and then ask how we can make that happen.

Just as counselors need to include campers in making decision, so camp directors need to include counselors in a similar process. A more democratic arrangement not only creates a feeling of openness and boosts morale among the staff, but also sets an example for counselors to replicate in their own cabins. Indeed, directors may even consider this issue when hiring: Does an applicant have the disposition and skills to help campers fashion a democratic caring community, or is this someone who needs to control kids?

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 we 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, we can usually produce temporary compliance. But neither "consequences" nor "positive reinforcement" can help campers develop a commitment to doing what's right, an understanding of why it's right, or a desire to become the kind of person who acts that way 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:

Be prepared, and be careful not to do
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 more likely they are to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. Extrinsic motivation, 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 become less likely to think of themselves as caring or helpful people and more likely to attribute their behavior to the reward.

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 trained.

Punishment is no better than rewards at 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 Lisa works as a counselor, and she listens while the head counselor sits all the kids down, lists the "forbidden" behaviors, and outlines the consequences that will follow when rules are broken. Lisa tells me that after this introduction, one little boy says, almost in tears, "I'll never remember all those rules!" Another starts to punch the child sitting beside him, just seconds after being warned about the consequences of such behavior. All the kids look restless, anxious — and a lot less enthusiastic about being at camp.

In addition to setting an unpleasant tone, the use of threats invites kids to figure out how to avoid detection, or to weigh whether the forbidden behavior is worth the penalty. It leads them to regard staff members as cops to be avoided rather than as caring allies to whom they can turn. It makes them focus on the "consequence" to themselves of breaking a rule, rather than on how their actions affect others.

In short, rewards encourage kids to ask, "What do they want me to do, and what do I get for doing it?" Punishments encourage kids to ask, "What do they want me to do, and what happens to me if I do it anyway?" But authentic character education encourages very different questions: "What kind of person do I want to be? What kind of camp experience do I want to have – and what can all of us do together to create it?" Positive reinforcements and punitive consequences (that is, bribes and threats) make it far less likely that the latter questions will even be asked, let alone answered.

Public recognition of kids who jump through our hoops therefore reveals itself as triply flawed. It's an extrinsic motivator, which can undermine intrinsic motivation. It sets kids up as rivals for artificially scarce recognition, thereby creating resentment and threatening to erode any sense of community. And it amounts to a patronizing pat on the head from someone who has the power to determine unilaterally what constitutes admirable conduct – a top-down approach that excludes kids from wrestling with the important questions about virtue.

This strategy, and others like it, are generally devised by camp leaders with the best of intentions. I share their commitment to character education in the broad sense. But many specific practices employed to bring about those worthy goals may need to be reexamined in light of research and experience. The bad news is that some of what we're doing in camps may not really be helping kids to become decent people. The good news is that we can do better.

This article was adapted from Kohn's keynote address at the 2003 ACA national conference.

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