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

By Alfie Kohn

A substantial number of people believe that camps can do more than provide fun and games. 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 young age that certain behaviors are strictly forbidden if you want to be leader — or who should clean up after themselves.

Of course, parents have the primary responsibility in the area of values. But not all parents have been very active, nor should they be asked to do it alone. Schools and camps, among other institutions, can help. For example, one group of 11- and 12-year-olds, ethnically and economically mixed, had been raising pigs and selling them to a local farmer. The kids took their pigs to market, but the farmer’s scale was broken, so they had to estimate the pigs’ weights. The farmer gave them a $5 bill in change. The kids decided to return it to the farmer. Their teacher was very impressed, but the kids were simply doing what they thought was right.

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 isn’t anything like 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 program of character education, 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 have very different ideas about its specifics. They may even refuse to adopt the label, on religious or other grounds. In this essay, we’ll focus on the narrow sense of the term, examining one well-known experiment that illustrates some basic assumptions that underlie a great deal of current thinking about character education.

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 thwarting the place was for the camps to work in cooperation with each other, not in competition. One way we can begin to grow in their roles, becoming disturbingly helpful 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 summers 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 bullied each other’s bandmates, planted rumors, threw food, and attacked each other after the games and at night.

The results became alarming 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. The only strategy that finally succeeded in thwarting the problem was for the camps to work in cooperation with each other, not in competition. One way we can begin to grow in their roles, becoming disturbingly helpful or sadistic, respectively.

The results became alarming 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. The only strategy that finally succeeded in thwarting the problem was for the camps to work in cooperation with each other, not in competition. One way we can begin to grow in their roles, becoming disturbingly helpful or sadistic, respectively.

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 the impression that, “This is fine, we’ll figure out the other stuff on our own”. The only strategy that finally succeeded in thwarting the problem was for the camps to work in cooperation with each other, not in competition. One way we can begin to grow in their roles, becoming disturbingly helpful or sadistic, respectively.

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