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 entertainment; they also hope to have fun. They can also promote children's social and moral growth.

This explains the growing interest among American Camp Association members but also 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 the camps.

Of course, parents have the primary responsibility in the area of values. But the camps now play a supporting role. They are raising kids who are not only getting ready for the future, but also helping to create 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

3. Kids learn to make good decisions by making decisions.

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, for distributing the week's chores, and for making decisions about entertainment. They can also work together to create a cabin code of conduct. It's important that the code not be written in a top-down way – the kids need to have control over the process.

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 what are the practices we can use to do that? We can begin to do a lot if we ask the right questions:

1. What is the role of punishment?
2. What is the role of rewards?

In the realm of character education, the answer to these questions 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 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 learn what they need to learn. 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 kids the idea 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

2. Kids learn to make good decisions with bad decisions. One leading character education program asserts that we should list desirable character traits and then specifically and repeatedly tell kids which traits they must possess.

But the term character education is also used in a narrow sense, to refer to a particular form of education that emphasizes moral values. 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 the narrow interpretation of it to be counterproductive. There are people who want to use character education to send a message that if you do such and such (for example, cheat on a test), you will have (for example, go to college).

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

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