

## **Character Crossroads and Beyond**

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We often get very busy with hiring, programming, marketing, registration, budgeting and managing the other day-to-day things that occupy our time. I've heard more than one of my colleague's say, "I think character development is great, I just can't manage another program right now". Well, the good news is that character development isn't a program, it's an outcome. And you are already doing a great deal of it at your camp. Your program and the staff members that you hire are already effecting the values of campers either for good or ill, whether they know it or not, whether they want to or not, it's happening. Since campers in your program are already receiving character messages, let's examine a few ways to ensure that the delivery is effective and successful.

**Hire for character.** Every staff member needs to be someone who has accepted positive values into their life and can demonstrate them in a manner in which children can learn. During the interview process, ask your prospects questions such as, "Are you someone of high moral character? If so, how did you get that way? How did you learn your value system? How in turn can you teach those values to a camper?" Keep asking questions that target the specific behaviors that reflect certain values, do not let them off with a fluffy answer. When a prospect says, "I will tell my campers to treat others the way you like to be treated." That's a fluffy answer, ask them, "What does that look like?" If they can answer that respect is demonstrated by making eye contact, using campers' names and speaking in a warm and comforting tone, hire that person on the spot. You can always teach them to play soccer or make a craft. Let your prospects know that camp staff are "Professional Role Models" and make the character expectations clear before they are hired.

**Expand your vocabulary-** Caring, honesty, respect and responsibility are great words and are excellent as a starting point for character development, but if you are going to have a meaningful dialogue about values, you need to be able to discuss character as the multi faceted puzzle that it is. In addition, having a colorful mosaic of character terms keeps it fresh and interesting for campers and staff alike. Imagine that for the millionth time a camper hears his counselor say, "Johnny you weren't very respectful to Sally." Johnny knows the drill; he yawns and replies like a robot, "I will try to be respectful of others." Now imagine that the counselor pulls Johnny aside and says, "Ya know Johnny, you weren't very considerate to Sally" or maybe tolerant or compassionate or whatever works. That might be something he hasn't heard before and maybe he doesn't know how to respond. Perhaps Johnny isn't sure what that word means and there is a great opportunity for more learning.

Provide tools for your staff, for instance; spend some time developing a list of "words that teach character". Divide the list into four columns with the headings caring, honesty, respect and responsibility. Place all the new words into the most appropriate column. Provide each staff member with a copy of this list and have them tape them to their clipboards.

**Plan character outcomes-** Every activity at camp and every interaction is an opportunity for character development. Don't think just because you have an archery range and you know campers can learn self-confidence there, which it is actually happening. Recognize that every activity has concomitant learnings, those things that can be learned as a result of the experience not just the primary skill. And concomitant learnings can be either positive or not positive based on the social interactions during the experience. If you are teaching archery, then campers will learn to hold a bow, stand properly and follow the rules of the instructor. They will also learn to be patient or impatient, confident or timid, humble or boastful. The camper who is having great success, is bragging about his skills and is commenting on the performance of the less skilled campers will have these traits reinforced by a staff member that does not recognize this opportunity and take action. Encouraging that camper to recognize that it's ok to be proud of their performance, now help a friend improve their technique, will make that camper and the whole unit more successful. Each area of camp needs to be examined to determine exactly what the expected character lessons that can be learned at each one is. Write them down. Have the staff not just plan their lessons, but what the concomitant leanings of those lessons will be. Now when you talk about character development at camp you can talk specifically about the behaviors being learned throughout the camp.

**Character Crossroads-** Simply put a character crossroads is a significant moment when the resulting character lesson is directly affected by the manner in which that situation is handled. These are not the simple quick teachable moments that occur over and over and are managed and soon forgotten. A character crossroads is a more significant learning opportunity, one you know will be remembered. Take for example this true story; while in line at the store five-year-old Stephanie asked her mom to buy her a candy bar. Mom said no, but on the drive home she noticed in her mirror Stephanie eating a candy bar in the backseat. Character Crossroads. Mom can drive home frustrated and upset but in time to start dinner, the message to Stephanie, stealing is bad, but not that bad. Or what this mom did, turn the car around, march Stephanie to the store manager and have her explain why she stole. Message to Stephanie, stealing is not something I ever want to do again. There is no preparation for handling a Character Crossroads, the key is in the recognition. It's a little cheesy but I use the statement that the effect on character (E) is equal to the Character Crossroads (c2) multiplied by the manner in which it is handled (m). Or  $E=mc^2$ . Sounds silly, but giving staff a simple and familiar way to visualize a Character Crossroads helps them recognize them.

**You are not Superman-** and you don't have to be. You are a role model for positive values, but you are not perfect. If you have accepted positive values into your heart and sincerely try to demonstrate them in a manner in which others can learn, then you are doing well. People who strive to live by and teach values are easy targets for doubters. People love to try to find hypocrisy and make comments like, "that wasn't very caring". If you are sincere in your efforts, then be proud of the work you are doing and keep doing it. Your title makes you a camp director or counselor, but your passion and dedication make you a role model.

If you would like more information on building character at your camp, please feel free to contact Mark Pooler or Patrick Connelly at [www.ctcampguys.com](http://www.ctcampguys.com)