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## WHO'S WATCHING THE KIDS? THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT CAMP COUNSELOR TRAINING

One of the toughest jobs facing parents each spring is figuring out what their children will do each summer. Some children will go to a day or resident camp for one to eight weeks, while others may sample week-long sports and specialty camps or youth programs. But no matter what type of camp parents explore, as they evaluate facilities, tuition and more, their most important question should be: Who will be watching my child?

Camps accredited by the non-profit American Camp Association (ACA), are more prepared today to answer that question than ever before. In the past 25 years, camp staff training has kept up with the youth development profession in ways that mirror the fields of education and human resources training.

Historically, camps were places that city kids went to breathe clean air, experience the outdoors, and learn new physical skills. Camps still offer children outstanding outdoor learning opportunities, but today camp directors are more intentional about making the camp experience part of a child's education. Achieving that goal requires more mature counselors, plus a much greater emphasis on staff training and professional development for counselors and administrative staff.

Andrew Yankowitz, owner/director of Tall Pines Day Camp in Williamstown, New Jersey, says, "Staff training is a huge priority. How else do you communicate the message of what you are trying to do for your campers?" At Tall Pines, which serves 600 children throughout South Jersey, all senior counselors must have completed their freshman year of college. The average senior counselor has returned to camp for at least five summers. And every counselor, new or old, receives about 24 hours of pre-camp training, plus weekly training throughout the summer. Yankowitz says that because more families now have children in day care and are used to having constant contact with their children's supervisors, parents want lots of communication from camp. "Our staff training has evolved to focus more on customer service for the camper and the parent," says Yankowitz. "We now spend more training time on severe allergies, special diets, self-esteem issues, and children with special needs."

The movement to recognize camp as part of a child's year-round education has been fueled by extensive research that supports the many positive emotional and developmental benefits of the camp experience. But for many parents, camp is still just something for children to do in summer. Camp directors say that many parents don't ask about staff training when they inquire about camp, and that camps don't actively market

their staff training, although they consider it the most important thing they do to ensure a successful summer. As a result, parents may not be getting the message that, at least at ACA accredited camps, camp staff are now much more skilled and sensitive to a variety of contemporary issues than counselors of a generation ago.

For nearly 100 years, a typical camp counselor trained for the job by progressing up from the ranks of camper through summers spent as a Counselor's Aide, a Counselor in Training, and a Junior Counselor. Only swimming supervisors were required to have special certification, and "specialties" like archery and riflery were taught by counselors with some expertise in the field. "Today," says Cheryl Magen, Vice President of ACA Keystone Section and Director Emeritus and Educational Consultant to Camp Ramah in the Poconos, a traditional Jewish resident camp located in Lake Como, Pennsylvania, "the certification programs have expanded because of the camp offerings. Now it's ropes courses and outdoor education, climbing walls and small watercraft. Camps who skimp on certifications are opening themselves up for lawsuits. Because the insurance industry is in many ways 'the tail that wags the training dog,' a camp has to cover its bases."

As camps seek to keep competitive with new activities like trapeze, BMX bike courses, and go-karts, the insurance industry has taken an active role in providing educational resources about safety and risk management for camp professionals. ACA also partners with other organizations to provide expert training in a variety of activities throughout the year. And to meet ACA's rigorous camp accreditation standards, camp directors must document their professional development in 14 core areas of operations.

Carol Ann Reed, Senior Child Development Director of the Central Delaware YMCA and Aquatic Center in Dover, Delaware says, "We provide about 30 hours of training to new hires and camp staff. One topic we always have is Behavior Management. Others might include Leadership Qualities, Building Trust, and Character Development. Sexual Harassment training is given by someone from our Association qualified through the YMCA to train in this topic. Videos on blood borne pathogens, CPR, and first aid training are given. Field trip policies and procedures, buddy systems and counting children are also covered."

Cheryl Magen says that the extensive training at Camp Ramah has changed over the years. "It used to focus more on routine and basic counseling skills," says Magen. "Now we deal with bullying, eating disorders, special needs, divorce issues, and more."

Today's job description for a camp counselor often reads like a posting for a management position at any major company. On its website, the ACA lists 20 traits that camp directors seek in staff, including the willingness and ability to foster self-esteem, cooperation, courage, and responsibility; the ability to motivate others, and the ability and willingness to be a positive role model.

Michael Chauveau, Executive Director of ACA's Keystone Section serving Pennsylvania and Delaware camps and families, says that camp staff training has evolved so that it's not enough anymore to hope that a counselor will have excellent skills in personal

interaction; those skills must be proven. Chauveau says, “Within ACA, the nurturing of a youngster is as or more important than the development of a physical skill. The organization has worked to bring professionalism to the job of counselor so that successful camp counselors can now market skills like team-building and leadership when they compose resumes for the business world.”

If counselors don't possess all of the skills camp directors seek at first, they have many opportunities to learn them in classes, workshops, conferences and online education offered by individual camps and the ACA through its network of Sectional offices. In March, thousands of camp staff will meet in Atlantic City for the country's premier camp conference where, over three days, camp professionals will participate in 200 workshops taught by a broad variety of industry experts. About half of the topics cover the many aspects of camp management; others address more difficult topics like Teaching Teens to be Leaders, Sports Psychology, Cutting and Self-Mutilation, Character Education, Eating Disorders, Child Obesity, Girls & Bullying, Emotional Intelligence, Empowering Girls with the Gift of Self-Confidence, and Cultivating Presence, Poise and Purpose in Adolescent Boys.

Once a stepping stone to an adult job, many students now aspire to a lifelong career in camping. Nationwide, about 350 colleges offer degree programs in some type of recreation management, and 20 universities offer doctoral programs in the field. Cathy Scheder, ACA's Manager of Learning Resources, is in many ways typical of camp professionals today. Scheder has a degree in Camp Administration and Youth Agency Programming. She worked as a counselor, senior staff, and camp director for many years before joining ACA, where her job includes creating training opportunities for camp staff with expert organizations like the National Recreation and Parks Association and the National Outdoor Leadership School. Scheder says, “Camp today is all about youth development. The environment is the vehicle, but youth development is the outcome.”

Today's camp counselors are generally better educated, better trained, and often more motivated than what most parents expect of the person watching their child at camp. To be sure that your child is at a camp that places a high priority on professional development, first seek a camp that is accredited by ACA, then ask about staff training. Camps that invest in their staff know that well-trained counselors are their best investment.

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#### SIDEBAR:

The American Camp Association (ACA) is the nation's oldest professional organization dedicated to enriching the lives of children through camp. ACA serves families with many resources, including a camp planner, CAMP Magazine, and CampParents.org, a comprehensive camp resource offering a searchable database to help find a camp and expert advice from camp professionals. For more information, visit: [www.CampParents.org](http://www.CampParents.org) or [www.acacamps.org](http://www.acacamps.org).

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ACA's local offices can also help parents with expert advice about the camp experience. In Pennsylvania and Delaware, contact: Michael Chauveau, Executive Director, ACA Keystone Regional Section, 215-886-5385, [executive@ACAKeystone.org](mailto:executive@ACAKeystone.org).

In New Jersey, contact Mary Ellen Folsom, Executive Director, ACA New Jersey, 908-238-9900, [executive@ACAcampsnj.org](mailto:executive@ACAcampsnj.org).