**Six Habits I Wish Every Counselor Had**

**One: Connect Before You Redirect**

Any time you as a counselor or a friend offer a child a suggestion or a practical tip about a friendship issue, a fear, or any other concern, you are "redirecting" behavior. That is, you are offering advice on a new or more productive direction for them to take given the situation at hand. Redirecting is a natural and essential part of guiding and teaching children. The challenge is that when children (like the rest of us) experience a challenge, they often simultaneously experience strong emotions. They may feel discouraged, frightened, betrayed, irritated, furious, embarrassed, guilty, ashamed, or any of a number of other sentiments.

When children are emotional they often can't take in the well-intentioned advice you as a counselor want to give them. It is as if the emotion is a distraction that keeps them from being open to your help. "Connect before you redirect" is a highly practical maneuver that addresses the emotion in a child *before*trying to offer him or her a way to deal with the situation. The simplest way to connect with a child is to acknowledge what that child might be feeling. "I can see how frustrated this makes you. That must be hard." Or, "I can see how disappointed you are. It's tough when something you've been looking forward to doesn't go the way you had hoped."

Teachers, coaches, counselors, and even parents have a tendency to jump straight to the advice. While the aim of your advice may be very positive and come from a true desire to see the child succeed or master the situation, while in the throes of emotion, the child *can't hear you*. Until you give your camper a chance to feel your concern and establish a sense of connection with you, your good advice will fall on deaf ears.

There are several ways to acknowledge a child's emotion and connect with him or her:

1. Acknowledge feelings.
   * "I can see how upset/sad/frustrated you are."
   * "I think a lot of people would feel the way you do."
2. Acknowledge situations.
   * "Given what you've just been through, I don't blame you for feeling the way you do."
   * "You've had a lot on your plate. No wonder you're exhausted."
3. Acknowledge positive intentions.
   * "I understand you were just trying to help out. You didn't mean to get in the way."
   * "I think you were trying to be a friend to her and she just didn't understand what you meant."
4. Acknowledge positive effort.
   * "I know you were trying really hard."
   * "I admire how hard you have worked at this!"
5. Acknowledge character strengths.
   * "You are an incredibly generous person."
   * "Being thoughtful of others is who you are."

Taking the time to acknowledge a child and connect with him or her paves the way for that child to be more receptive to what you have to offer as a way of coping with the challenge at hand.

**Two: Drop the Rope — A Master Skill**

I have a tale I tell counselors, teachers, and parents — and any adults who work with children. I tell them all children have a rope, or more precisely, an invisible fishing line that they carry at all times. These fishing lines are given out to every child throughout the world at birth. When children come to camp they pack them up and bring them along in their emotional duffel bag.

Campers use these fishing lines, of course, to go fishing. Except they aren't fishing for fish — they're fishing for you, their counselor. And how do they do this? They throw out their line by provoking you into a power struggle. Some kids do this by ignoring you. Others do it by challenging you. "You're not the boss of me!" This declaration is the children's way of throwing you their line in hopes that you will pick it up and engage in the battle. They love it when you do. Why? Because as long as children get adults to argue with them, they feel empowered ("Look at what I've gotten this big adult to do!"), and they also get to put off doing whatever it is they should be doing by spending that time arguing with you.

There are several "lines" youngsters use to hook us into a power tug-of-war. One predictable line is the "I hope you know this is a free country" statement, implying that they can do whatever they want. Or, "My parents paid a lot of money for me to come to this camp. I can do what I want!" Or the even more galling assertion, "I pay your salary. You work for me. You make my bed." That's when you can imagine taking that fishing line and doing something really creative with it!

When a child draws us into a power struggle, our first impulse is often to engage in that struggle. I call that engagement "picking up the rope." If you want to be more effective with children in general, let alone at camp, your first strategy should be to drop the rope. I don't mean that you let kids do whatever they want. I mean avoid the power struggle as much as you can. Following are the four steps involved in dropping the rope:

1. Stay calm. The reason children are provocative with you in the first place is to unbalance and unnerve you. As soon as you lose your cool, you have picked up the rope. And they win; you lose.
2. Make kids "right" about the part of what they are saying that is technically correct. For example, I might say, "You're right, I'm not the boss of you." Or, "I'm glad your parents could afford to send you here. This is a great place." Whatever you say, do it *calmly and without sarcasm*.  
     
   When children are expecting to trip you up, get you to lose your cool, and have a gut reaction to their provocation and you don't, you win the battle of wits. They hate that! It's akin to you being angry about a poor product or service and the person you want to pick a fight with — some poor, unsuspecting customer service representative — is really nice. So agreeable and helpful you just want to scream, but you can't. He or she holds the power by being calm and exerting great self-control.
3. After you "make a kid right about what he is right about," let it sink in. You might only pause for a fraction of a second, but pausing will hold the child's attention for that moment, enabling you to secure command of the interaction. Then simply say, "And . . . ." Most people say "but," which is a mistake; doing so negates everything you already said. "But" is also a word all children are programmed to tune out to when they hear any adult utter it.
4. As casually and deliberately as you can, state what you expect or what is true for camp. For example, "I'm glad your parents could afford to send you here. This is a great place. (Pause). And helping out is part of camp." By speaking in this way you are practicing clarity. Once you have gone through these four steps, it is important to move on. Your first impulse might be to stay locked in with a child. Granted, there are times when a safety issue may make it impossible to move on. But in most instances, once you've said your piece, moving your attention to the next camper or activity forces the child to face a sobering choice: either move along or take things to the next level. To be sure, some kids will go to the next level. In my experience more than 85 percent of kids drop the issue.

**Three: Stay Out of the Point of Struggle**

Many times during the day at camp, campers find themselves in what I call the "point of struggle." That is, they are highly stimulated, either in a positive or negative way, and are extremely challenging to work with because they are less likely to respond to your appeals as a counselor during times like this. An example is the picky eater who, in the dining hall, refuses any choice you offer. Another example is a cabin full of kids who are overly excited and won't settle down to get ready for bed. There are scores of times when you may find yourself in the point of struggle with a camper or campers. Luckily, there are several things you can do to avoid the point of struggle.

1. **Try to identify patterns in your campers' behavior.**The point-of- struggle behavior in question is probably not a surprise after a few days of camp. Once you can anticipate your campers' behavior, you can plan ahead. For example, does your camper tend to act up just before swimming, get homesick in the morning, or become agitated at bedtime? Patterns in camper behavior are easy to spot once you know to look for them.
2. **Plan ahead.**Talk with your campers well ahead of the time that their challenging behavior normally occurs. For example, with the fussy eater, by the time you are in the dining hall it's too late, and the cues around food will have already triggered her reactive state. You can discuss food choices far more reasonably, with better input from her, if you do it a few hours before you set foot in the dining hall.
3. **Offer choices and alternatives.** With the camper who experiences early morning homesickness, talk the night before about what she can use to soothe herself or occupy herself with when she wakes up. Does she have a stuffed animal that she can keep close by? What about something to read or color? What if she were to draw a picture for her parents that illustrates her favorite activities from the day before? (Hint: Focusing on the positive will help.) Tell her that her drawing can become a "letter" she can send to her parents later that day. Again, the more you are able to engage the child before any hint of homesickness has set in, the more he or she will see you as an ally and the more the camper will be able to come up with ideas of his or her own.
4. **Put incentives in place ahead of time.** With the boy who has trouble settling down at bedtime, talking with him ahead of time may help you find out if his wild behavior is actually a defense against feeling sad about missing home. When you talk with him while he is calm and not yet in a troubled state, he is likely to be more self-reflective. Whether or not you are able to get a sense of what might be driving the behavior, putting some simple incentives in place ahead of time may help you manage the behavior. For example, if he can be on his bed with his teeth brushed and ready to settle down, he gets his flashlight before anyone who isn't settled down and he gets a certain number of "points" that he can use toward doing something he loves. Earned points might be used for an extra waterskiing turn, playing one-on-one basketball with his favorite counselor, feeding the animals at the barn, or getting to play a special game during the next day's rest hour. By giving this young man something positive to focus on, you just might help him reassert his self-control once bedtime does roll around.

**Four: Tell Me about It**

Things unfold quickly at camp. What is new in the morning is ancient history by the time dismissal comes around at day camp or the evening activity is underway at resident camp. Keeping your director informed about important developments with campers can be a challenge, but having a way to brief your unit director or division leader about critical behaviors can help you get a fresh perspective on how to address those challenging camper behaviors and avoid surprises most directors dread. Camp supervisors know that many counselors use everything they know before giving up on a camper. This tendency is one of the things that makes camp such a great place. Informing your supervisor of the challenges you are having is not the same as giving up, nor is it a sign of weakness. In fact, the best counselors take advantage of every resource available at camp, including the wisdom of those who have been at camp for many years.

What are some of the "red flag" behaviors to which I am referring? Tell me about any camper who:

* Is having a persistent problem with homesickness
* Seems to be separating him or herself from the rest of the group
* Doesn't seem to have or be making friends
* Is dominating or manipulating the group
* Isn't eating
* Has a problem with personal hygiene
* Has persistent bed-wetting accidents
* Has nightmares or sleep disturbances
* Has been in a physical fight with either a staff member or other camper
* Has been having temper outbursts
* Has shared something upsetting with you or other campers
* Is overly preoccupied with sexual matters
* Has been asking overly personal or sexual questions of you or other counselors
* Has displayed some kind of inappropriate sexual‑ behavior (name calling, storytelling, graphic language, simulating sex like "humping" other kids)
* Has been sick, gotten hurt, or has been making frequent trips to the infirmary
* Has bruises, a rash, or other signs of a physical problem
* Has been refusing to go to activities
* Has been found with contraband in the cabin (including medication)
* Has been threatening to run away
* Has been engaging in fire play or using matches, etc.

**Five: Walk and Talk**

One of the more effective ways of getting through to a camper is having what I call a "walk and talk." When you are trying to establish a deeper connection between yourself and a particular camper, doing something with him or her while you are talking can be helpful. Obviously, if that activity is too absorbing, like going down a zip line, not much talking is going to take place. Walking offers an easy rhythm that provides just enough action without distracting from the conversation. Because you naturally walk from activity to activity throughout the camp day, it is easy to utilize "walk and talk" as a way of getting to know a camper or a small group of campers better.

You can arrange to have your co-counselor take charge of the other kids while you engage with your camper. You may want to take the camper aside and ask him or her to help you out with something at the end of the activity. Or simply be direct and invite him or her to walk with you to the next activity. Doing so allows the other campers to move ahead with the co-counselor, leaving you to walk one-on-one with the camper with whom you want to connect.

A more deliberate approach is to set up a "walk and talk" routinely with each of your campers, taking a little personal time with each camper as a way of getting to know him or her better. Having some undivided, one-on-one time with each camper will enhance your connection with him or her and, in turn, may allow you to influence the camper's behavior more positively as a result.

Boys in particular seem to be able to engage in conversation more casually when they are somewhat active. Besides taking a walk, I've played catch, played a one-on-one card game, and gone down to a lake and skipped stones while engaging them in conversation. This kind of low-level activity has an almost calming effect on many boys.

One word of caution: When you take any camper for a walk, for your own protection, you will want to stay within the guidelines of appropriate contact with children. Make sure you are never completely out of eyesight of other adults when you are one-on-one with a camper. You can be several yards or half a field away, be visible to others, and still have enough privacy to have a meaningful, personal conversation with a camper.

**Six: Sleep**

This last piece of advice comes from many years of working with sleep-deprived high school and college students in my psychotherapy practice and from the thousands of camp counselors I have met over the past 40 years. Most young adults are, in my opinion, sleep deprived. That said, I can't overstate the importance of getting enough sleep, especially during the demanding time of camp. When you sleep, your brain recharges, sorting through the day's experiences and "storing or discarding them (which causes dreams) so that you wake up alert and clear-headed," according to Dr. Travis Bradberry in his recent *Huffington Post* article on productivity (2016).

Bradberry goes on to say:

*"Your self-control, attention, and memory are all reduced when you don't get enough — or the right kind — of sleep. Sleep deprivation raises stress hormone levels on its own, even without a stressor present, which are a major productivity killer. Being busy often makes you feel as if you must sacrifice sleep to stay productive, but sleep deprivation diminishes your productivity so much throughout the day that you're better off sleeping.*

*When you're tired, your brain's ability to absorb glucose is greatly diminished. This makes it difficult to control the impulses that derail your focus. What's more, without enough sleep you are more likely to crave sugary snacks to compensate for low glucose levels. So, if you're trying to exert self-control over your eating, getting a good night's sleep — every night — is one of the best moves you can make."*

Most people in the world need between seven-and-a-half and nine hours of sleep to be at their peak performance level during the day. If you truly want to make a difference working with campers and be the best that you can be, having enough sleep on a consistent basis will help you make use of the other good counselor habits discussed here. So, sleep well and use the advice to your best advantage. You and your campers will be better for it.