

## What Counts the Most?

By Gary Forster

I really enjoy visiting camps during their staff orientations to see the great young people that will do the most important work of “role model” throughout the summer. I like to jump up on a chair and yell out “WHO DO WE WORK FOR!!???” and they spontaneously yell, “WE WORK FOR THE KIDS!!!!” And I shout right back, “AND WHAT’S OUR GOAL!!???” and they scream “FUUUNN!” They’re wrong on both counts.

These kids didn’t pay for their own way to camp, they didn’t sign themselves up. Who fills out 95% of the camp registration forms? That’s right, MOM. She’s the one that gets the ball rolling each year, takes responsibility for researching camps AND makes the final decision as to whether her child is ready for camp, where they’ll go, and how long they’ll stay. Wouldn’t it be smart to find out things she thinks are most important? Take some guesses on what our interviews found...

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

You’re a smart and savvy, so you got the first one right, SAFETY.

But how can Mom know we’re safe without seeing us in action? She has to find some evidence, like what photos we put in our web site and brochures, what our camp looks like on a tour, how (and if) we answer her questions when she calls the camp office. And she looks for testimonials, both good and bad, from her friends, relatives and neighbors. What do we call that? Right again, “word of mouth.”

Let me tell you the next four because they’re so enlightening:

2. High-quality, well-trained staff as role models.  
Character growth.
3. Learn new skills to build self respect. (Not just the “Good job!” empty praise, but actually help them “hit the target.” (Archery is the number-one requested activity, by the way. My

guess is because they can’t do it at home, and it has such a satisfying sign when you get it right!)

4. New (and better) friends. (Better than the ones they bring home on the bus after school!)  
Protection from bullies.
5. Fun

Does your camp use these as your goals when you design your programs, your activities, and your marketing? More often we’re trying to keep kids “active” and out of trouble, and make sure they have “fun” each day. How well does that work?

We did an interesting study to see the difference between camps that had a high return-rate for campers, and those with few campers coming back. You know what? They were having almost the same level of fun. In fact they didn’t think the “camp” fun was that much different than going to Six Flags, playing X-Box 360, or hanging out at the mall.

Why DID kids come back at some camps and not others? What do those camps provide that fun doesn’t fulfill?

Friends. Kids don’t use terms like “relationships” – they’re looking for friends. In fact that’s what we’re all looking for. And at some camps we’re better at helping that happen than others, where kids spend more time looking AT each other instead of at the back of another kid’s head. They not only do an activity, but then have time to talk and share and laugh about it. These camps include the times and places, the counselors model what friends do, and the ENCOURAGEMENT to learn the social skills that people require to make and keep friends. Some kids pick it up on their own. Many do not. Those are the kids that we can really help.

What if your camp was known as the place where kids not only MADE friends, but actually LEARNED the social skills to make them “friend-ready” for a lifetime?

Now THAT would be something that could change their world. And ours.

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