

14 QUESTIONS

You can use this table like a worksheet, asking questions as written or posing a variation that suits your camp and its

philosophy even better. Few owners or directors would ask every question on this list, but I recommend you ask at least half

of them; more if any answers to the initial round give you pause.

| # | Question | Commentary | Possible Red Flags | Your Variation |
|--|--|---|---|----------------|
| Questions that tap a candidate's understanding of normative youth development. | | | | |
| 1 | When is it up to a camper to set a limit? | <i>This is a bit of a trick question. Children set all kinds of limits for themselves, such as when to stop eating. But, ultimately, it is always an adult's responsibility to set a limit with a minor.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate fails to cite any circumstance when adults need to set limits. • Candidate expresses a desire to grant freedoms to children that are not healthy, such as staying up all night, consuming alcohol, or watching adult films or videos. | |
| 2 | Can you describe a time when you had to set a physical limit with a child? | <i>Another trick question. It would be appropriate to set a physical limit if a child were in imminent danger. For example, you would hold a child back if he or she were about to cross the street without looking. However, skillful discipline almost always involves setting limits in nonphysical ways. (Naturally, there are also many kinds of appropriate physical touch that adults use with children, such as handshakes and high-fives.)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate fails to distinguish imminent danger from other circumstances when physical touch would not be appropriate or necessary. • Candidate describes using physical punishment as a consequence for misbehavior. • Candidate states an unrealistic extreme regarding physical touch, such as, "I would never ever touch a child — anywhere — ever." | |
| 3 | Why do kids look up to adults? | <i>All young people admire one or more adults, whether real or fictitious. The human tendency to emulate the example of those in a position of authority automatically endows youth leaders with an enormous responsibility: to set a sterling example.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate cites superficial or inappropriate reasons why a young person would admire him or her or any other adult. • Beware of answers such as: "The grown-up gives them things that their parents don't allow." or "The grown-up lets them let loose, swear, or break other stifling rules." | |
| 4 | What do you think a teenage (or school-age) girl or boy needs from his or her counselor? | <i>All young participants in your program have needs, such as safety, structure, social connection, healthy food, age-appropriate freedoms, and fun activities. They also want to feel understood and cared for by the adults in charge.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate strays into territory that reveals how he or she sometimes thinks about campers as peers, as best friends, as romantic objects, as family, or as military cadets. • Beware of answers such as: "They just need someone who really loves them." or "They need an adult who can show them what it really means to be grown up, to initiate them." | |
| Questions that reveal a candidate's understanding of healthy relationships with youngsters. | | | | |
| 5 | What special times do you enjoy with kids? | <i>Most adults enjoy special times with relatives, students, or other youngsters with whom they have a familial or professional relationship. This question probes the interviewee's understanding of these relationship boundaries.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate fails to distinguish between having favorites and playing favorites, or seems to exclude or fixate on certain kinds of children. • Candidate speaks about spending one-on-one time with children that is developmentally inappropriate (e.g., taking a young child to an R-rated movie) or unhealthy (e.g., sharing an alcoholic beverage). | |

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| 6 | What are some of the reasons young people enjoy spending time with you? | <i>Similar to Question 5, the interviewee's answers may reveal either an understanding or some confusion about what constitutes a healthy interpersonal connection between an adult and a child or teenager.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate talks more about being "cool" and sharing pop-culture content with young people than he or she talks about being a wholesome role model. • Candidate talks more about permissive leadership (e.g., "I let them do stuff that other adults don't let them do.") than about setting limits, being reliable, being a hard worker, or behaving in ethical ways. | |
| 7 | What is the nicest gift you've ever given a young person? | <i>Listen for the context here. It's completely appropriate for a parent to give their own child a new bicycle, but odd for a camp counselor or babysitter to give someone a new bicycle.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate gives examples that are not appropriate to the nature of the adult-child relationship. • Candidate discusses gifts that are lavish, designed to curry favor with the child, keep the child quiet, or otherwise manipulate the relationship. | |
| Questions about personal secrets. | | | | |
| 8 | What are some misconceptions that people have about you? | <i>Everyone is misunderstood in some way. This question may uncover an adult who feels misunderstood by almost all other adults, but who feels understood in some special way by children or teens.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate derides other adults, claiming they are ignorant, naive, or don't really understand him or her or the world of young people today. • Candidate suggests that he or she sometimes behaves in ways that are intended to be affectionate or good-natured but that other adults criticize, dislike, or unfairly restrict. | |
| 9 | What would you like to share with me, privately, before I check your references and before your background check comes back? | <i>You should always give interviewees the chance to save face by providing background information to you in person, before you read about it on a report. This question is also a reminder that you will be conducting background checks and following up with each of his or her references.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate cites any past behavior, attitude, charge, conviction, or circumstance that disqualifies him or her from working at your camp or other youth program. • Candidate minimizes something from his or her past that you think is fairly serious. | |
| 10 | What impressions do you want people to have when they see your online posts? What would I see if I had access to pages to which you restrict access? | <i>Most of the staff you're hiring were raised online, so expect them to have an array of profiles (many of which you can view). This question points to image management and the intended audience of their online persona.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate describes an online presence that is primarily aimed at a cohort younger than him or her. • Candidate describes content and desired impressions that seem intended to captivate youngsters rather than peers, to exaggerate or falsify attributes, or to showcase unhealthy risk-taking, nudity, sex, violence, or drugs. | |
| Questions about work history and future. | | | | |
| 11 | Why did you leave your last job? | <i>Employment law usually restricts previous employers from talking about the reasons for termination. However, you can always ask the job candidate directly.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate gives you a reason that does not make sense or has internal inconsistencies. • Candidate talks about being loved by the kids (if previous job was a youth-serving organization) but feeling misunderstood by all or most of the adults. • Candidate outlines a special program for youngsters that he or she tried to start but which was not embraced by his or her previous employer. | |

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| 12 | How would people know when you're angry? | <i>This question taps something primal. Everyone gets angry, but it takes humility to admit it and courage to describe it to a prospective employer. But without good emotion-regulation skills, caring for other people's children is risky business.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate denies that he or she gets angry, or opts for a euphemism, such as: "I get upset from time to time, but never angry." • Candidate minimizes the experience of anger by suggesting that he or she "simply lets it go." or "just doesn't let things bother" him or her. What you want to hear instead is how this person copes adaptively with strong negative emotions. | |
| 13 | Can you name three things that are inappropriate for a staff member to discuss with a young participant? | <i>Anyone worth hiring will be able to rattle off six or eight. Hesitation suggests that the person is being disingenuous. Plus, clarity about what is inappropriate conversational content for a young person usually means parallel clarity about what is appropriate. Bingo.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate hedges, as if to suggest that he or she simply does not have adult-only thoughts or never considered the deleterious effects of adult content on youth. • Candidate shows muddled understanding of the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate topics of conversation. | |
| 14 | If you were a camp director looking to spot concerning behavior — behavior that might lead to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse — what would you look for? | <i>This is perhaps the most difficult question of the lot because it requires knowledge of grooming behavior — the insidious courtship rituals that child molesters use to establish rapport, trust, and justification for an abusive relationship. Identifying the precursors of harmful adult-child relationships takes insight and honesty, and usually indicates maturity.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidate evidences little insight into grooming behaviors, such as showing favoritism; spending exclusive, one-on-one time with one or two children; giving atypical gifts; offering to assist a particular child to the exclusion of other children; acquiring toys or games that attract children almost exclusively; or spending little time with other adults. | |

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Nevertheless, thoroughly checking three meaningful references, properly training and supervising all employees and volunteers, and completing all relevant background checks form a trio of solid hedges against unprofessional conduct. Whether you interview by Skype or use the more reliable and revealing technique of an in-person interview, some key questions can help experienced senior staff identify risk factors for immoral or abusive behavior. With credit to the many camp directors with whom I have had the pleasure of working over the past 20 years, I offer my commentary on 14 questions with significant power to discern corrupt from incorrupt counselors. Perhaps therein lie one or more ways to prevent unsafe behavior at your camp next season and beyond.

Remember that no set of questions can reveal proclivities or intentions that a job candidate is intent on hiding or about which he or she is not consciously aware. Hire thoughtfully, according to recognized industry standards, and then train and supervise your staff as if they were taking care of your own children.

Red Flags

Does a "possible red flag" answer to any of these questions indicate that the candidate has or will abuse children? No. But any answer that gives you a queasy feeling is cause for concern and ample justification for asking follow-up questions. Try to understand candidates' thought processes, how they make decisions, what they consider to be healthy in an adult-child or adult-teen relationship, what they find gratifying about working with youth, how they cope with stress, and whether they understand their own human vulnerabilities.

Some directors don't ask questions like these because they don't want to believe that anyone would want to harm children. I get it. But turning a blind eye to the profile of an abuser or the risk factors for boundary violations only amplifies the risk.

Behavior-based Interviewing

Most savvy job applicants have learned to answer the hackneyed "What is your greatest weakness?" with "I work too hard" or some equally trite variant. So don't bother with that line of questioning. Instead, I recommend the *Behavior-Based Interviewing* approach,

pioneered by psychologist Paul C. Green in the early 1980s and later championed by Gary Forster (Green, 2014).

Forster, who was camping specialist for YMCA of the USA from 2001 to 2009, endorses an interviewing technique based around the single, central question: "Tell me about an accomplishment about which you are extremely proud." Open-ended follow-up questions build on the prospective employee's strengths and weaknesses, style of coping with adversity, leadership, attitude, and other key parameters of professionalism. Examples include:

- "Tell me more about that."
- "What specifically did you do that led to a successful outcome?"
- "What were some of the challenges you encountered along the way?"
- "How did you manage your feelings of frustration?"
- "How did you find the process of collaboration?"
- "What would you do differently next time around?"
- "What did this accomplishment teach you about yourself?"

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