

# The 7 Absolutes of Camp Counseling

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Those who have tracked my work over the years might be asking what in the world I would be doing making a list of 7 absolute anything's when it comes to working with youth. I have always maintained there is no simple formula for working with humans because they are both dynamic (ever changing) and primarily emotional (not rational). While I've always understood the appeal of lists like these, counseling work is just not that simple.

What then is different about this list? When you read it you will find statements so specific that they will in fact generalize to what could be considered universal truths. If embodied and impeccably practiced, they would have a significant positive impact on your camp culture and the lives of those in it. In reverse, when you consider things that didn't go right in the past, note how many of them would have been avoided had these "absolutes" been followed.

This is designed to share with your staff during orientation, even to put it in your handbook. I suggest coming back and revisiting the list several times throughout the summer. When you read them, you'll understand why!

**Never assume your playful sarcasm, especially use of nicknames, will be taken as you intend it.**

In fact assume that at some point it will be taken so wrong that you will deeply regret it. Sense of humor is much more cultural and personal, than it is universal, yet few people realize how true this is. Many males in particular have grown so accustomed to the endless ribbing that they forget there was a point where they learned to shut themselves off emotionally from the sting

survival mechanism response and it makes it harder to be at ease opening up and trusting others. Most children haven't reached this point, and with your help, hopefully they'll never have to. Your best bet is to keep it positive and model for your campers how to relate without the constant "jokes". It will take some work, but the benefits will make it all worth it!

**Always follow through on what you say you'll do. Never promise what you can't deliver.**

Only make commitments you are 100% certain you will keep – this goes for anything and everything, not just rewards and consequences. It is easy in a moment of inspiration to make a promise with the best intentions, only to find that when the time comes to deliver, other things get in the way.

This is particularly true when it comes to doling out consequences, especially in an emotionally charged moment. Kids have the most amazing way of remembering the intricate details of what adults tell them. Not following through diminishes credibility, and credibility is a hard thing to regain once it is lost.

Inconsistency in adults is one of the most common things children encounter, so the opposite is also true: Being the kind of person who always follows through on what you say, elevates your status in the eyes of your campers immeasurably. This is in fact one of the most common qualities kids talk about when they speak about the adults whom they trust the most.

It is a simple point, yet it can make all the difference.

**Always intervene when you hear campers put each other down - Never believe a camper who says “it doesn’t bother me”.**

In our lives we are either growing into the people we can become or putting energy into protecting who we are. We can’t have both simultaneously. Camp is one of the few places where we can control the external environment enough to give children an extended opportunity to grow.

Too many stories of kids who wind up in great trouble start with the innocent name calling and the adults who ignored it when they had the chance to do something about it. Letting it slide by even once sends a message that you condone the behavior, or at the least that you’ll only respond when it is extreme. It truly doesn’t matter how skilled a counselor you are at intervening, just saying something about it being “not okay” or “un-cool” is enough to disrupt the flow of what is going on. Intervene consistently and you’ll establish a culture does not permit this negative behavior. Who knows, doing so may also save a life someday.

**Check in with every one of your campers, every day and make certain to ask the right questions.**

With the amount of events and interactions in a typical camp day, more goes on than any one person can possibly stay on top of alone. Even counselors with a small group of 8 to 12 kids have everything they can do to keep up with things. It can be easy to let several days go by without spending one on one time with every camper, especially when they seem to be having fun and doing fine.

To counter this, make it a point to sit next to different campers at each meal, do individual activities with your campers during rest hour and ask each of them to speak about their day at bedtime each night. Make a nightly ritual of asking each

camper to take minute and answer questions like “What was the best part of your day?” and “What was the most challenging part of your day and what did you learn from it?” You’ll be amazed by the things you’ll learn and what it tells you about what matters to your campers. Most importantly you’ll be prepared to address all concerns without anything or anyone “slipping through the cracks”. The essential thing is to do this every day, without fail, no excuses!

**Make something special out of unstructured time, especially bedtimes.**

Many of the best camper-counselor moments happen during unstructured time like free play, rest hour and bedtimes. This is also the time that many counselors spend the least amount of their times with their campers, choosing instead to take breaks or rush to get their evening time off. Spend time with your campers then and truly discover the magic of camp and the camper counselor relationship.

The value of creating nighttime rituals is immeasurable. In particular, the tradition of story telling is as old as human history. There is a powerful bonding that happens when elders gather with the young and tell stories that lead them on journeys of their imagination. Contrary to what many people believe, story telling is not something that gets “graded” by your campers. Telling any story that is appropriate for someone their age is enough to generate the bond and make your campers feel more connected with you. The effort you put in at night will pay great dividends in terms of the respect and closeness they feel with you during the day. It might just provide the best memories you have of your summer as well.

## **“When in doubt, don’t!”**

Every time your campers ask you if they can do something that you do not already know with 100% certainty is okay to do, stop, pause and consider carefully before answering. The most essential responsibility you’ll be asked to fulfill as a camp counselor is to keep your campers safe. Most accidents in camp happen because of careless errors that could easily have been prevented. Often times it is violating simple rules that young counselors do not think are that important, things like not running on the dock or allowing campers to run around barefoot where they are not supposed to. The rules are often a result of having learned from past mistakes. Follow them and you can benefit from their misfortunes in the past, and not make them yours.

Many other troubles arise when counselors make decisions to allow spontaneous mayhem to occur, things like “raids”, pranks and even pillow fights. There is a way to let mayhem happen in a controlled way and a way that it gets out of control. Remember that kids are much more driven by the emotional rush of the fun they are having in a moment than by considerations of safety. In fact, you can assume that at some point you will have to say “no” to something they just can’t understand. It may not make you popular in that moment, but it will keep them healthy for when they bounce back, as they always do.

**It is always better to be thought of as a great counselor by your director, than to be thought of as a cool one by your campers.**

The vast majority of your time this summer will be spent with people younger than you. For most people, this is an unusual experience. It is not always easy to maintain the proper boundaries, especially if you get tired and fatigued. Any veteran camp staff member will have their stories of the times they slipped and took something personally or found themselves getting

drawn down to behaving on their campers level, and regretting it afterwards!

Working with children should be fun, and being able to access your playfulness to connect with them where they are is essential to your success. Just make certain that you always remember you are the adult and you are hired to be professional in all your decision making. Just think about the adults who played the most positive roles in your life growing up. While they may have been “cool” at times, they always kept your best interest in mind. Though they are always on your side, this certainly doesn’t mean they always take your side. Take this approach with your campers and you too will have the same kind of positive impact on their lives as those people have on yours. Your value to the camp will skyrocket as well!

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As with any list of this sort, it is never complete. I guarantee if you follow these 7 things though, you will minimize the lows and maximize the highs... and what else would you want? Summer is too short for it to be anything less than fantastic.

To learn more about Jeffrey Leiken his staff orientation trainings, camp leadership training and innovative programs for teens in camp:

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