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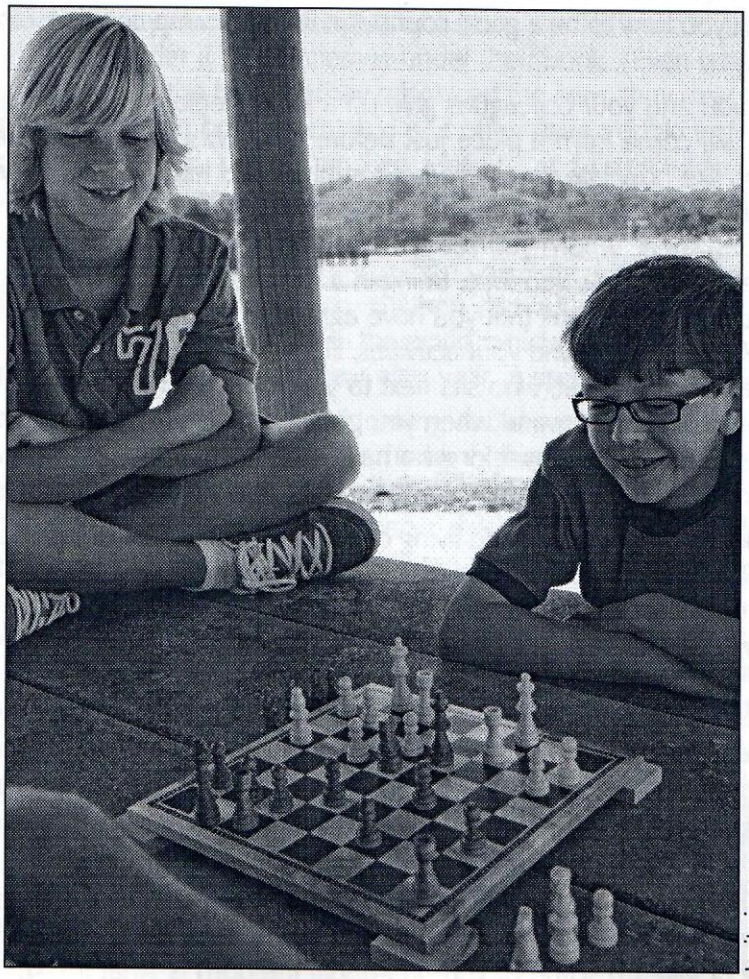
How Hard Can this Possibly Be? The Art and Craft of Being a Camp Counselor



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From time to time while I am at a camp doing staff training, I run across a counselor who questions the need to have an outside professional like me come to their camp to talk about working with kids for the summer. "Just how hard could this possibly be?" one young man once asked me. "I mean, you get together with a bunch of kids and do fun stuff at a place with great facilities, while other people make your meals and take care of the place. Aren't we making too much of this?"

If you are an experienced camp counselor or camp professional, you probably have a wry smile on your face reading that last comment. To be sure, being a camp counselor and hanging out with kids at camp can be a lot of fun. If it weren't, people wouldn't do it year after year to the tune of almost a million counselors and 10 million campers or more every summer. On the other hand, being a camp counselor may be one of the more difficult jobs in the world. Let me explain.

First of all, there are as many ways to be a camp counselor as there are people doing it. There are no lessons you can take—no college practicum or Red Cross course—that will teach you how to be a good counselor. Being a camp counselor is truly *on-the-job training.*

Second, you and your colleagues give up a lot of personal freedom to do this job. Most of you will come from a place just before camp where you had the freedom to decide things, like how late you stayed out at night and how you organized your time. You most likely had a lot of *choices* about whether you showed up for breakfast, what you ate at each meal, whom you sat with, or what time you ate, and on and on. Kiss that entire set of freedoms goodbye. Being in a camp community means giving up a lot of *personal choices.* It means that you have agreed to abide by decisions other people will make about your time and your activities, like what time you get up in the morning, when you eat, what you eat, who sits next to you, what your schedule is, whether you can go out at night, whether and when you get time off, and even who you get to take days off with. If you are a counselor who has come from a college or university setting or your own apartment, this change can be a difficult adjustment to make.

Then, consider the working and living conditions at camp. At day camp, you start *as soon as the kids get on the bus.* Forget that camp hasn't officially begun. Once campers congregate, they start interacting, and that's when camp officially begins. Once you are at camp—day camp or resident camp—even if you have a period off, when a kid is in need, when they have fallen and hurt themselves, like it or not, you are "on!" You can't tell an injured child, "Hey, I'll be right there as soon as my period off is over!" If it is 2 o'clock in the morning and a camper is having a nightmare, you're up—and *on!*

Then, there is the issue of privacy. Camp is a rumor mill. At camp, people work in such close quarters and share so much that if you have something private about yourself, just wait five minutes. By then, the entire community will know your business (or, more likely, some distorted, rumored version of it). Being in a community is especially difficult for Americans, since we are used to having a lot of personal freedom. Having to compromise or give up some of your individual freedom is what it takes to be part of any community, not just camp. At camp, there is always tension between having a mind

of your own and being part of a community, where the greater good of the group must take priority.

Finally, there is the work with the campers themselves. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, children in their natural state are noisy, nosey, messy, impulsive, imperfect, and dependent. No wonder your non-camp friends don't recognize you when you return home. Look who you've been hanging out with all summer! The *regressive pull* I described in Chapter 2 can be subtle and exhausting. What happens is that, as human beings, we tend to *mirror* or mimic the behavior of those around us after a while. Being a camp counselor, where you are constantly with campers whose behavior is hardly mature, you may have a tendency to regress. Before you know it, you are acting more like a child than an adult, *and you may not even notice it.* It takes a lot of emotional energy to stay in a mature, centered, thoughtful state of mind, when the pull to regress is all around you.

Children also have a tendency to accuse one another of the very things *they* do wrong. If something they own is missing, they accuse the kid next to them of taking it—only to find it later under a pile of clothes under their bunk. (Even when they find it and all evidence points to the fact that *they* misplaced the item, they may still insist *they* didn't put it there!) Kids can be self-centered and often have trouble waiting their turn, asking for or accepting help, controlling their feelings, and listening to others. When something goes wrong, they are quite skilled at pointing out what others may have done to contribute to the problem. On the other hand, they often have a harder time seeing what role they may have played in it. Then, when you least expect it and are tempted to commit a major felony against them, children can suddenly be the most caring, appreciative, affectionate, funny people in the world, which may be why so many young adults continue to work as counselors year after year, in spite of the sacrifices.

Children also have their own way of looking at the world. I remember being at a YMCA camp in Texas one year, where the dining hall worked like this: every camper went through the cafeteria line to get their food, and then came to two long tables, where there were condiments, salad, and "extras" they could take. On the first table, this particular day, was a huge bowl of beautiful big red apples. Above the apples was a sign that read, "Help yourself but, please, take only ONE! And remember, God is watching!" At the end of the second table was a large plate of freshly baked cookies. Above the cookies, there was also a sign that read, "Please help yourself." The other lines had been crossed out by some teenage comedian, and in place of what had been written, he wrote, "And remember, God is watching the apples!"

Youngsters are a work in progress—which adds up to a lot of work for you, every summer there are different kids. One summer, you might have someone with Tourette's syndrome, or a kid with a hair-trigger temper, or a camper who just doesn't fit into his or her cabin or group. On the other hand, perhaps you'll have a group of kids who just can't share or who fight about the littlest things—or who are all homesick. The truth is, no matter how much information parents put on their "camper behavior forms," you just don't know what your campers will really be like until they get off the bus or come

through the front gate. Some camps do a pretty good job of sitting down with counselors beforehand to assess each camper in the group or cabin to give them a "heads-up" about the personalities, habits, or hobbies of the campers. Then again, some parents just don't share the truth about their children. Like the camper who has an extreme bedwetting problem at home that parents think will miraculously disappear when the child comes came to camp. Or the child on stimulant medication for Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) whom the parents unilaterally decide to take her off her meds for the summer, even though they will tell you she can't sit still in school for two seconds without it. The truth is that no one knows how each child is going to be at camp in the particular group they have been placed in until the camper actually arrives.

So, while it would be nice to think that you can simply "wing it" as a counselor, the truth is that working effectively with children is no different from most other professional endeavors: It takes skill, practice and patience. Being a camp counselor is a craft. It is a set of skills and talents that, when you practice, you can actually become better at. It takes no skill, insight, self-restraint, or ability simply to "gut react" to kids. Anyone can do that. And when we do, there is no gain, no improvement, no advancement, no better outcome, or no growth to be had. To be thoughtful and respond in a way that makes a difference with a child—where the camper actually learns something that enhances the child's ability to accept help or see someone else's point of view or wait patiently or overcome a fear—takes patience, practice, and skill. And did I mention patience?

That is what this book is all about. It is organized by chapter, according to the different ways you will be interacting with your campers: one-on-one, in their group, and during activities. The skills and tips are organized from very basic to more complex or advanced. That said, the following points are a few things you should keep in mind that will help you be a better counselor:

- *Know your campers.* The more time you take to understand what the campers are like, what they fear, how they learn, what excites them about camp, where they are vulnerable and where they are strong, the better able you will be to connect with them and work with them. Even though you will be working with campers in a group, knowing them as individual young people will greatly enhance your influence with them.
- *Get organized.* Being a counselor can entail a wide variety of tasks and situations, including birthdays, tryouts and activity periods, team or play practice, clean-up jobs, dining hall lists, special diets, and campers who need to get their medication, to name only a few. Add to this mix, taxing emotional elements like, some kids being homesick or being afraid of the dark, and you can have a lot on your plate. Resist the urge to try and carry it "all in your head." Keep a clipboard or notebook with good notes. It is a *job* after all.
- *Smile* a lot, especially when you see each camper for the first time every day. Human beings are "hard-wired" to look at faces. A smile is a universal sign of approachability, acceptance, and friendship. You might actually have to practice this suggestion.

Key point #1:
Be aware that nonverbal communication counts.

Ever find yourself humming a tune you can't identify, even though it's maddeningly familiar? If you're like most people, it probably drives you a little crazy. It's interesting how a tune can get our attention from out of nowhere. I often wonder how long the tune has been on my mind before I actually noticed it.

That's exactly what the nonverbal part of communication does: it gets into our heads and helps form an impression almost without us "knowing." When we say we have a "feeling" about someone, often that "feeling" or impression comes from some nonverbal communication our senses are taking in, even though we may not always be aware of it.

For example, songs have what I call the "words and the music." The tune, or "music," is recognized by a part of the brain that is entirely separate from the part that identifies the words—just as the part of the brain that recognizes what someone says is very different from the part that "reads" their body language—or the way they say it.

Nonverbal communication, for example, the look on your face, the tone in your voice, the way you say something, how you stand or move, whether you are flushed or calm, is often more meaningful to children than what you actually say. Kids pick up on our "hidden operating system" or nonverbal language, and determine whether we are safe or "cool," simply by reading the look on our face or the tone in our voice. In fact, school-aged children "get" about 70 percent of their communication from others nonverbally, while four to six year-olds get up to 80 percent of the meaning from others nonverbally. (It is interesting that many children like popular songs for the music and don't become aware of the words until they are much older.)

People who are very effective with children are very aware of their nonverbal communication, as well as that of the children or people with whom they work. This factor is one of the most fundamental areas of skill that anyone can have working with children. The more aware you are of the nonverbal language of yourself and others, the more effective you will be with people—particularly with children.

Key point #45: Counselors sit *across* from one another.

The best place for co-counselors to sit in group meetings is across from one another. If there are more than two of you, position yourselves evenly around the circle. Doing so means that you and your counselor colleagues will be able to see one another at all times during the meeting. It means that if you are missing what a camper is doing because they are sitting right next to you, the counselor across the way will see it even if you don't. It also means you will be able to catch the eye of your co-counselor(s) if you need to make a change in the agenda or make some other adjustment or address a certain issue. It also increases the likelihood that the two or three of you will talk to one another during the meeting—almost like thinking out loud. This practice is especially powerful, since it demonstrates to the campers that you as counselors are on the same page and work together effectively—an important message to give young people.

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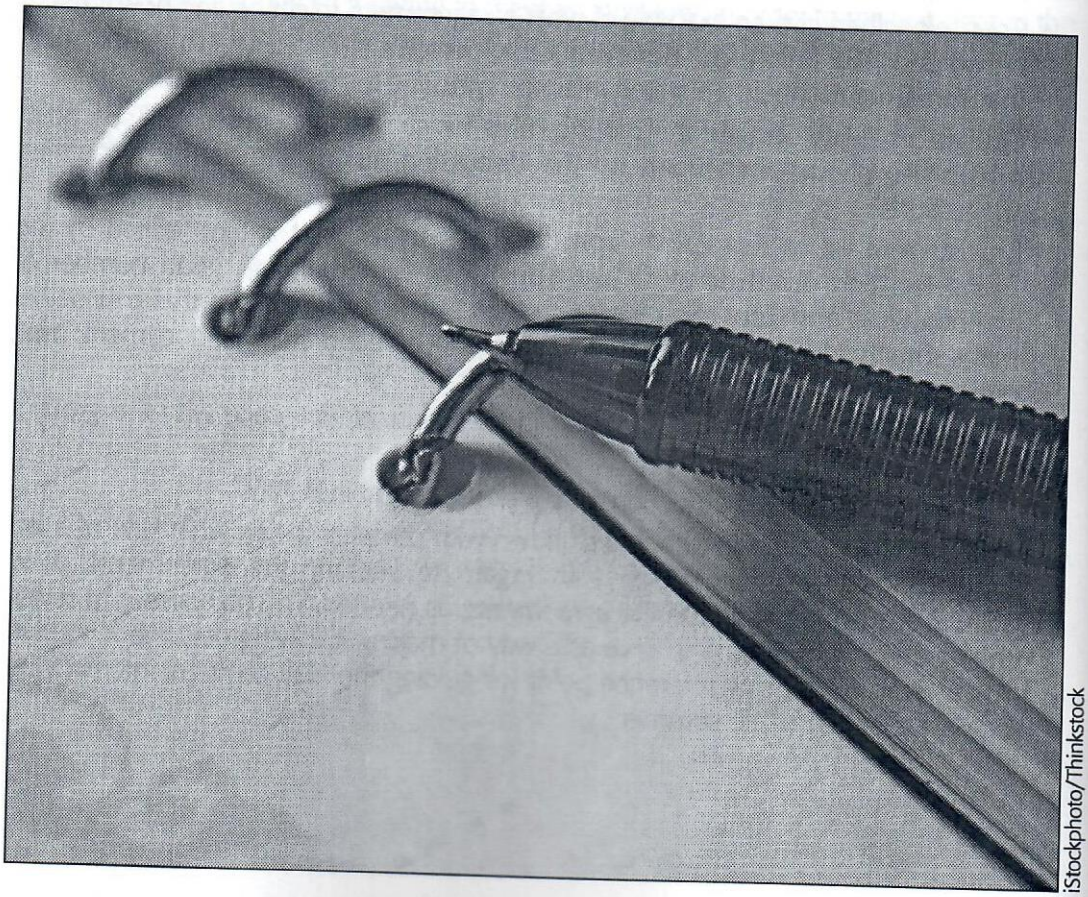
Key point #50: The list of "firsts"

A cool thing to do with a group or cabin is to create what I call a "list of firsts." Any time a camper does something at camp they've never done before, like go waterskiing or down the zip line, or get on a horse or try out for a play, it gets written down on the list of firsts. This practice is a fun way to mark the activities of your campers and give them a chance to talk about the experiences they are having at camp.

The best way to mark new accomplishments on the list is to take a few minutes to meet briefly with the entire cabin or group, preferably at the end of the day, and have each camper share what it is they have done that day that is something they've never done before at camp. After they describe the activity, it gets written down on the list. Having a brief meeting, where campers share publicly with the rest of the group what they have done during the day, helps build unity and cohesion in the group. Otherwise the campers don't get the benefit of sharing with everyone in their group the new things that they have been doing. By doing it in the evening or at the end of the day at day camp, you help your campers get into a more reflective mood, one in which they can think about all the great things they have been experiencing at camp. It can even help campers identify things that they want to make sure they do before camp ends.



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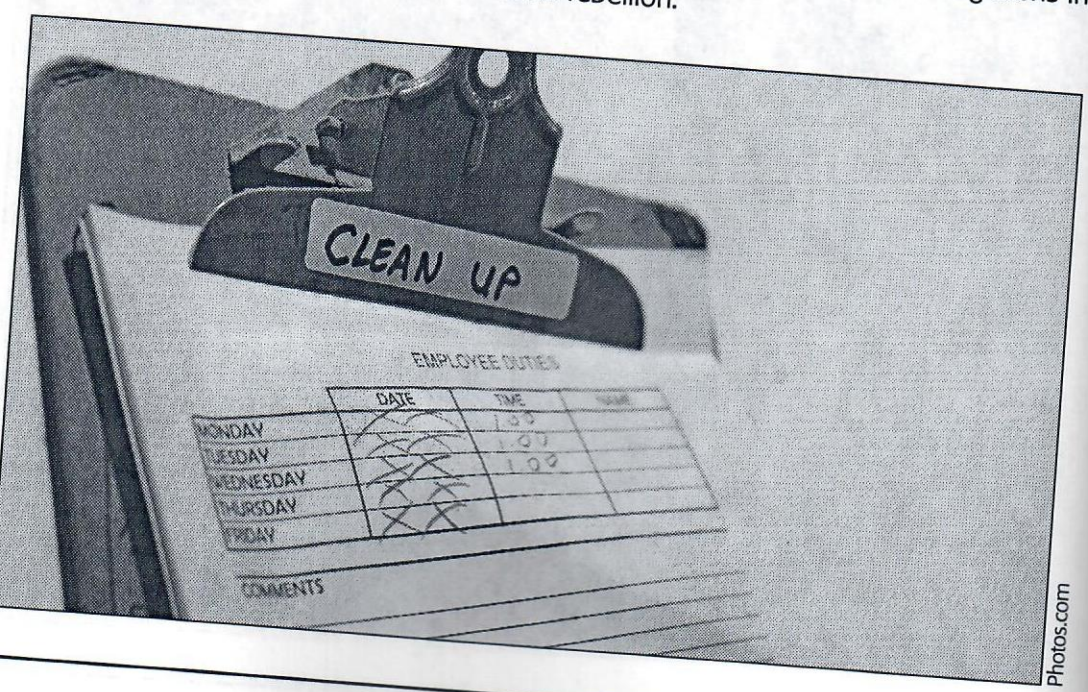
Key point #52: The cleanup checklist

The cleanup checklist is a way to have campers take more initiative and ownership for the cleanup chores they are expected to do at camp every day. The underlying idea is simple: a chart is made with the names of every camper along the left side of the paper. You might consider including counselors on the list, so you can participate as well. Along the top of the page, you have the days of the week. Within each day you have the three or four things that every camper is expected to do for that day, like make their bed, sweep under their bed, put their dirty laundry away, and straighten their cubby. The sheet includes a column under each chore, day-by-day, so that each camper can find their own name, go across to the day of the week, and within that wider column, find the smaller column that corresponds to the job they just completed. Keep a pen or marker hanging on a string next to the chart, so that as each camper finishes a particular job for that day, they can walk over to the checklist and check that job off next to their name.

The cleanup checklist allows campers greater independence, while at the same time giving you, as the counselor, a quick moment-by-moment glance that indicates which campers are finished and which ones still have chores to complete for that day. The only time a camper should go on to the special job assigned to them for that day by the job wheel is when they have checked off all their other personal, daily chores on the checklist.

The job wheel works especially well with younger campers at resident camp, such as those ages 7 to 11. I use the checklist with the youngest campers as a way of praising their efforts: "Oh, look! Sally just checked off making her bed. Great going, Sally." This kind of praise works best with campers 7 to 9 or 10. Truth be known, praising teens in this way would undoubtedly cause a minor rebellion.



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Key point #57: Countdowns

An extremely valuable practice with groups is what I call a "countdown." Children have a tendency to become absorbed in the moment. In other words, most of them get so caught up in what they are doing that they lose track of time. This ability to become absorbed in an activity is called "flow experience." I call it play with abandon. You can see flow experience when kids are highly engaged in a board game, a sporting competition, or wrapped up in some other engrossing activity, like spontaneous imaginative play. The fact that children achieve flow is one of the great things about camp. Getting them out of it is sometimes a challenge.

A countdown is when you start announcing the impending end of an activity period. "Okay, kids! We have five minutes before we clean up!"

Notice that the warning is timed to account for the clean-up time that might be required at the end of an activity, like putting supplies away or spending time on debriefing, and not simply on the ending time of the activity period. In my experience, countdowns are useful with campers of any age—even adults. With younger campers you may actually want to give a minute-by-minute countdown. "Okay, we now have only four minutes until we have to start cleaning up!"

The alternative to using countdowns is getting into deal-making with kids. "Oh, just one more minute! I just need to do one more thing!" For a child who is waiting their turn in a sporting event, or when there is a close game, or when a child is making something they really like, getting them to give it up is tough. Simply announcing that their time is up is too abrupt and jarring for most children. Countdowns help by getting kids ready to get ready.

In the National Football League, there is something called the "two-minute warning." During this period, the game officials blow their whistles, the game clock is stopped, and the teams change players on the field. It is like the officials are saying to both teams, "Guys, you have two minutes before the game ends. Get your act together!" Frankly, I say if it is good enough for the NFL, it is good enough for camp!

Key point #58: The well-placed "raid" or escapade

One of the most fun parts of camp is when counselors take campers on "raids." I use the word in quotes because most raids these days are, unbeknownst to campers, prearranged by the staff. Raids are not about destroying other cabins or stealing things. They are about being on a clandestine escapade, usually at night when campers think they may get into trouble if they get caught out of their cabins. A raid, in other words, is safe risk-taking.

Some camps prohibit the use of raids, because they are concerned that they might be teaching kids that breaking the rules is fun. Personally, I think kids have the ability to make distinctions between a special event and business as usual. As long as the raid does not involve the destruction of property or anyone getting hurt, they can be a great bonding exercise for a group of campers. The following true story about a raid I helped design will show you what I mean:

Several years ago, when I was visiting a camp in Maine, I heard about a group of 13-year-old boys in a cabin who were having a hard time getting along with one another. They were teasing and razzing each other, playing pranks and having what seemed like endless petty arguments with one another. It was clear they were not bonding as a group.

When I spoke with the directors about it, I suggested a well-planned escapade. The directors demurred, saying they did not believe in such things for the reasons I previously noted—namely, they did not want to risk having counselors teaching campers that breaking the rules by being out late at night was cool. In addition, they were concerned about the physical liability posed by having campers running about in the dark, especially in a state of excitement, where their judgment might not be so good.

I acknowledged these points, and then I asked them how serious they considered the situation with these 13-year-olds to be. They told me they had never seen a group so fragmented. They were concerned that the boys were having such a bad time that they might not ever want to come back to camp. I countered by saying that extraordinary circumstances warranted extraordinary measures. I then asked if I could dream up something that was safe, non-destructive, and highly manageable, would they consider it? They agreed.

The plan was for one of the counselors to gather a few supplies (e.g., some soft drinks, the making for s'mores and maybe some chips—food always being the way to the heart of a 13-year-old—and get them out to a campfire site just beyond the main camp. As far as the kids knew, the counselor was going on their night off. They had no idea what was being planned. As the evening activity drew to a close, the counselor who was "on" told the guys that he had something secret that he had been planning for the cabin, that it was critical that no one know about it, and that he would tell them once they got back to the cabin for bedtime. The campers' interest was clearly aroused. When they tried asking him what was up, he simply said he couldn't tell them until they were safely back at the cabin, because no one else could know. There is nothing that piques

Key point #61: Building momentum—gearing up for action

Building momentum is an extremely useful practice with groups of kids. It is used for making a transition from a quiet-time activity or a resting mode to a more energetic one. The most common situation where building momentum can be helpful is in getting kids up in the morning.

While some younger kids get up at the crack of dawn, most campers have trouble getting out of bed in the morning. Given that the activity level at camp is much higher than many of them are used to, many campers get tired after a few days at camp. Building momentum at wake up time might include the following steps:

- Have the counselors get up first and get dressed, which will enable them to give their full attention to the task of waking up and greeting their campers for the new day. Their activity will also begin to stir some of the campers.
- Put on some music. It should not be loud or jarring, but happy and upbeat. Assaulting your campers will only make them dig deeper into their sheets. The idea is to slowly increase the noise and activity level (e.g., build momentum), so that getting your campers up will become progressively easier.
- Get the kids going who are easier to get up and who offer less resistance. This step will not only add to the activity level in the cabin, it will also allow you to give your undivided attention to those campers who have a harder time complying.
- Rub the upper back of a camper who is having trouble waking up. Again, no rough treatment, just a simple rubbing of the upper back to stimulate blood flow and help wake the camper.

Part of building momentum is keeping things positive. Pulling the sheets off a camper or pouring water on them or threatening them are not examples of building momentum. Such steps are abusive and have no place in camp. If you have trouble getting a particular camper out of bed day after day, consult with your supervisor about other possible approaches.

Using the aforementioned principles, you can adapt the step-by-step process of building momentum to fit other situations, like getting kids up from rest hour to get ready for their afternoon activities. In this case, remember to use some of the other pointers that have already been reviewed, like countdowns (Key point #57) and pivoting (Key point #28).

Key point #62: Lowering momentum—coming down off "high energy"

Just as campers sometimes need to go from a quiet or resting state to a more active one, times will exist when they will be full of energy and enthusiasm and need to quiet down. An example of this situation would be coming off the field in the evening, having just played a spirited game of capture the flag, then heading into the cabin, and getting ready for bed. Good luck!

First of all, when kids are excited and stimulated from a game or activity in which they have just engaged, their adrenalin levels are high. Adrenalin is the body hormone that increases heart rate and blood flow, dilates blood vessels, and generally causes a state of high alertness in people. It is naturally produced by the adrenal glands during times of physical exertion or exhilarating activity. Once our adrenalin levels are up, it takes several minutes for them to drop back down, which is the underlying scientific reasoning behind the notion that it is folly to try to put kids to bed immediately after they have been running around or engaging in a highly active or exhilarating activity.

Lowering or reducing momentum is basically doing what it takes to allow adrenalin to recede in the body. Giving campers a chance to talk excitedly about the game they just played or recap the plays they made or the close calls in the game are all good examples of ways we can provide them with an opportunity to catch their breath. Getting them into the cabin and letting them get a drink of water, move around, find their stuff, change—anything minimally active so that it does not increase the adrenalin level—are all examples of lowering momentum. Once kids stop sweating and their heart rates drop, usually in about 10 to 15 minutes, you can make the transition to something quieter or more reflective, like sitting down to do the "list of firsts" (Key point #50), brushing their teeth, or settling down for bed.

If you do not give campers a chance to lower their momentum, you are simply setting them (and yourself) up for trouble. As science tells us, kids can't change moods on a dime. Giving them 10 minutes will make the next hour you spend with them much easier.