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Avoiding the "Pinball Machine Approach" to Promoting Social Competence

Hitting the Target by Chance or by Design?

by Barbara Gilmour and Wendy McDermott, Ph.D.

## The Problem

The evidence is in. Studies show that kids with strong social competence and character do well in school and go on to be well-adjusted, contributing adults. The bad news? Social competence and character are in short supply these days. Employers and teachers are reporting significant gaps in social skills, manners, and integrity. This has led to a nationwide epidemic of bullying, with schools having to invest time and resources in teaching kids how to recognize it, prevent it, and deal with it. Society, schools, and parents are crying out for help.

## Camp as the Solution

What better place to equip kids with social competence than camp! Traditionally, social skills were seen as a very important but informal by-product of other camp experiences. Activities such as rope climbing were included in the program because they were fun, but also because they improved selfconfidence and teamwork.

In the not-so-distant past, it was assumed that kids were learning social competence at home, in religious institutions, and at school. Most kids came to camp with at least a rudimentary foundation in social skills, and camp promised to enhance those skills. The new reality is that camp is where many kids — including kids from so-called "good homes" — get social competence in the first place. So how should you respond? Don't fight it . . . capitalize on it.

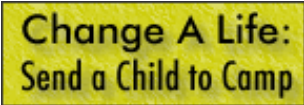
## Teaching Social Skills as an Entrepreneurial Niche for Camps

If you can demonstrate that you have a well-designed plan to address these issues, your camp is more desirable to consumers. Equipping kids with social competence is a major business opportunity for camps. There is a need, and you are uniquely positioned to fill it because you are out-of-the-box thinkers when it comes to education.

The message is "Camps have more to offer than ever to a society that can't figure out which way is up. Send your kids to us, and we will help them gain social competence." Why? Because camp is based on the premise that kids move ahead faster and better if we design relevant and fun learning experiences for them instead of leaving their progress up to chance. Otherwise, why not let them just play in the neighborhood?

## How Can You Make It Work?

You are more likely to achieve your goal of promoting social competence if you take a systematic



approach that is based on solid social science and educational research rather than hoping that the issues will be addressed by chance. Don't make the mistake of randomly throwing resources at the problem, hoping to hit the target (the pinball machine approach). If you're going to make social competence part of your new mission, then you must deliberately incorporate it as part of your program. Find user-friendly tools to work toward this objective.

### What Kinds of Social Skills Do People Need?

Before you can make social competence a selling point, you need to take a little time to understand the concept. Social competence is not about snobbery, exclusivity, or elitism, and it's not simply another word for table manners. It's not a way to make yourself feel superior to others. Social skills can be defined as "thinking and behaving in a way that brings honor to yourself and others." Social skills are about getting along with other people and knowing what kinds of behaviors are acceptable in various places so that you don't embarrass yourself or make others feel uncomfortable. The more we invest in our kids' social competence, the stronger and healthier relationships they will be able to build throughout their lives.

Some important aspects of social skills include:

- **Self-concept, self-confidence:** Your actions communicate how you feel about yourself. With high selfconfidence, you are able to withstand onslaughts against yourself. You can choose not to "receive" an insult, but rather to rise above it.
- **First impressions:** Do you come off as nervous? Competent? Friendly? Understand how a person makes an impression, and how much of this is under the person's control. First impressions are often misleading but they have an amazingly long lifespan.
- **Values:** Your values affect how you behave. If you want to know what you believe, look at what you do.
- **Reciprocity:** Most societies have some form of The Golden Rule: Treat others as you want to be treated.
- **Graciousness:** Treating people better than they might deserve. For example, saying "thank you"; overlooking imperfection in others; having the courage and strength to ask for forgiveness.
- **Respect:** Others have as much right to exist as you do, and have the right to be different from you.
- **Redefine cool:** You can't be truly cool if you are unkind. The kind kid is the cool kid, not the bully.
- **Manners, social skills, and character values benefit others and you:** You feel better about yourself when you treat people with respect. People want to be with you. People treat you better when you are respectful. When you are disrespectful, walls go up, cooperation goes down. Some highly educated people can't figure this out.
- **Gentleness, courtesy:** Understand how to say what needs to be said without creating collateral damage. Learn how to be a "safe" person.
- **Responding appropriately to authority and rules:** Rules and laws make the world a more predictable, safer place. Games are more fun when people follow the rules. When a camper who is refusing to cooperate says angrily, "My father pays your salary," the correct response is, "Your father is paying me to teach you how to respond appropriately to people." Jails are full of people who couldn't get this right.
- **Living, playing, and working together:** Learn how to be a gracious winner or loser; how to be a good friend; how to take turns in conversation; how to work with a team to accomplish a goal; how to compromise and reach consensus.
- **Compassion, empathy, and "otherfocus":** Acquire the ability to see another person's need and understand what he might be feeling, for example, knowing what to do when meeting someone new so that the person feels comfortable.

### How Do People Get These Skills?

There are informal and formal, or structured, ways to gain social skills. With informal ways, the skills are a by-product of other experiences. A significant informal way is through observing the behaviors and values that others model for us. "Children learn what they live." Another aspect of our informal education in social skills comes from experiencing consequences (often painful ones) for our actions: "If I do X, then Y happens to me, so I don't do X again."

When we say that there are formal ways of learning social competence, we must be careful to note that "formal" doesn't have to mean "boring." It means purposeful intervention with a deliberate plan or program — explicit activities designed to produce a particular experience or way of thinking.

Some people naturally pick up on social skills more easily than others. We often say that they have "good people skills," which are really a type of social/emotional intelligence. According to some theories, people have many kinds of intelligence: kinesthetic (athletic), mathematical, artistic, musical, linguistic, visual- spatial, etc. Some of these are more closely connected to success in life than others. You can live without artistic ability, but you will have a harder time succeeding without social skills. People naturally vary, but everyone can improve with appropriate experiences. At the heart of all education, whether at camp or at school or through life's experiences, there is a belief that change and growth are possible. At camp, we meet kids where they are and take them to the next level. We want to see campers overcome the hurdles that life and genetics may have thrown into their path.

### Your Challenge

How can you take what research is saying about promoting social competence, and do something fabulous with it at camp? How can you get kids to have so much fun learning to behave appropriately that they won't even notice that it's "educational"?

Here are some core principles to keep in mind:

- Decide that it matters: Poll after poll indicates integrity and social competence count in the real world. There is a saying in business: "Hire for character; train for competence," meaning you can train people to do the job more easily than you can give them character. People with weak social competence face many difficulties in life.
- Decide to intervene: Don't leave it to chance.
- Equip yourself: Educate yourself so you can choose the right tools. Network. Read. Attend talks. Avoid the pinball machine approach.
- Equip others:
  - Give tools to campers to acquire social competence. Make sure it's FUN, FUN, FUN.
  - Find tools to lead campers to social competence. Your job is so demanding that it is unreasonable to expect that you or your coworkers have the time or interest to develop social competence materials yourself. There are good materials on the market that have done the work for you. Concentrate on what you're good at, and take advantage of the expertise of others who have a different skill set.

### Selling the Idea

In the end, you've got to sell the idea that social skills matter and that camp is the place to get them. You need to help all of the stakeholders embrace the goal and the means.

- **Sell it to yourself:** Believe that it's worth pursuing.
- **Sell it to the other staff:** Share the vision with the camp director and offer to make a presentation at an orientation session. Help others embrace the goal and tools. Encourage creativity. Your enthusiasm alone doesn't guarantee automatic buy-in from the people around

you. Adults respond better when they feel that they have had some say in the direction they will be going. Run it like a seminar rather than a lecture: Give out a one-page summary of relevant information about why promoting social competence is desirable, and have the groups interact with the concepts and then present their observations to the others. Encourage them to write and perform skits, and generate lists of concepts that they think kids need to know. Letting the information arise from them empowers them as leaders.

- **Sell it to parents:** Help parents understand the value of social skills and character education. Make explicit reference to social competence and character education in your marketing materials.
- **Sell it to campers:** How you spin it really has an impact. Present it as fun time, not something that keeps them from getting to the swim pool.

Now you're ready to reap the benefits: You'll have happy campers, who get along better with others; happy parents who feel that they are helping their children to succeed in life by sending them to camp; happy co-workers who have an easier time dealing with kids because of better behavior; and a happy fiscal bottom line because you've got to, as the saying goes, "do well so that you can do good."

### The Stakes Could Not Be Higher

Whether you are on the front lines as a counselor or in the office, you are creating an atmosphere in which growth in social competence and character can take place. Every investment in a child pays off. Because of you, a child may be able to avoid an abusive relationship later in life. Because of you, a child may find true success in life, by choosing to love people more than things. Promoting social competence is a worthy goal for camps.

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