

The camp sent you home a 'new' kid. Here's how to keep him that way

JOANNE KATES

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Aug. 23 2012, 4:19 PM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Aug. 23 2012, 7:04 PM EDT

As director of Camp Arowhon in Algonquin Park, I get a lot of phone calls from parents after camp. The other day, a mom called: “I can’t believe it,” she said. “You sent me home a new kid. He makes his bed, he sets and clears the table. He hangs up his clothes without being asked! What did you do to him?”

I get at least 20 of these calls every season.

The story is always pretty much the same. When kids get home from camp, their parents report a dramatic uptick in all those behaviours that we, as parents, long for.

Parents tell me that they received a different child from the one they sent us. The children who get off the bus do house chores without being asked. They keep their room tidy. And they chat at the dinner table – rather like civilized humans.

Parents also tell me that their children come home more confident and resourceful. After all, at camp kids set and clear their tables, they clean their cabins, they get themselves to activities on time (wearing the right clothes and with their life jacket or canoe paddle or riding helmet), they fill and empty their own laundry bags.

Some of it can be explained by sheer happenstance: When parents are not there to fetch and carry for them, kids have no choice but to be more independent. And some of it is intentional.

Like most camps, our goal is to teach children to be more tolerant, inclusive and respectful of others. They are mentored and expected to grow their social skills, and the changes unfold before our eyes.

I watched a group of 13-year-old girls who had been excluding some girls in their cabin bloom into inclusive friends – thanks to cabin talks and lots of counsellor help. One girl, who came to camp as a perennial underachiever, turned into an ace horseback rider.

All that bed-making and table-clearing happens for about a week, after which they morph back into their more dependent selves. The stretching that occurs at camp snaps back, almost like an elastic band shrinking back to its original size: Kids revert to their less-independent, less-resourceful selves. And the readjustment to the social dynamic at school can be tough. Parents often call in September and ask me: “How come the kids at camp are so much nicer than the kids at school?”

The kids at school are just like the kids at camp. The difference is in the expectations and the supervision, which change behaviour profoundly.

Last week, just before the end of camp, I chatted with an eight-year-old camper who was scared of going home because, as she said: “Everybody’s mean to me on the playground at school, but here there’s always somebody to play with.” This child’s reality is that she is no champion at making friends, she is a bit awkward, so she gets bullied at school. She feels safer at camp because the counsellors ensure that she is included, and they are helping her develop friend-making skills.

Similarly, 14-year-old campers told us that they were worrying about going home because of the pressures that await them. They feel doubly pressured – by their parents to excel in school, and by their peers to do drugs and alcohol and have sex. Life is simpler at camp: Nobody engages in drugs or alcohol because either is an instant ticket home. They can’t have sex because the counsellors are always there. But, they tell us, at home half the kids are already partying hard, and they know that they will lose position on the social ladder if they do not do it too.

When I was young, I would mope for weeks after camp. My mother used to chastise me, saying: “You have to get back to reality.” But what if “reality” were more like camp? Is there a way to avoid the snap-back to old behaviours?

Parents can foster more independence in children. Try taking a page from camp’s playbook. The independence expectations at camp are rich in natural consequences: If you fail to set your cabin’s table, nobody has plates to eat off. If you don’t do cabin cleanup, your cabin-mates feel let down – and they tell you. If you don’t get your laundry into the bag and to the laundry depot (and pick it up after laundry day), you have no clean clothes.

What if mom did that? “Oh, you don’t want to set the table? Gee, that’s too bad. I guess I’m not going to cook dinner.” Failure to pick up clothes could result in a withdrawal of laundry services. Not having the right gear for activities or books for school could result in ... nothing – no parent on their white charger riding to the rescue. Then reality would be more like camp, and independence skills would result.

As for the more complex psychosocial pressures and problems, having somebody to talk to, somebody who does not judge or pontificate but who listens, for as long as they need to talk, is a big part of why many children feel safer at camp. Camp counsellors are trained to listen more than talk. Parents have a hard time listening about subjects like school pressures, drugs, alcohol and sex because our fears for their well-being send us into instant authoritarian forbidding mode – which makes them clam up.

If we challenged ourselves to behave more like camp counsellors, and listened more without jumping to prescribe or forbid, we could help our kids navigate the rocky shoals of their social world. Lots of kids worry about going home from camp because they are returning to a rigid and punitive social ladder where they may be uncool or unathletic – and undervalued because of that. Parents can’t control a kid’s world, nor can they make it kinder. But we can make like a camp counsellor and find a new balance – between listening well and giving up the “fetch and carry.”