

# Putting Camp in the Childhood Equation

**A Conversation with Rachel Simmons and Michael Thompson**

In preparation for the 2010 camp season, the American Camp Association® (ACA) enlisted the expertise of Rachel Simmons and Dr. Michael Thompson, best-selling authors and specialists on the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of childhood. Both professionals offer insight into why camp is so valuable to kids today and how the mentoring nature of the camp counselor-camper relationship can provide the positive role models kids need in building self-awareness and figuring out who they are and who they want to be.



Rachel Simmons is the author of *The New York Times* bestsellers, *The Curse of the Good Girl: Raising Authentic Girls with Courage and Confidence* and *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. She is an educator and coach, and founder of The Girls Leadership Institute (GLI), a nonprofit organization aimed at equipping girls with the skills of assertive self-expression and emotional intelligence to build authentic relationships. Rachel has logged many hours as the GLI summer camp director and has run programs for summer camp leadership and staff.

Dr. Michael Thompson is a child and family psychologist, school consultant, and author or co-author of eight books, including *The New York Times* bestseller *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, which became a two-hour PBS documentary and details ways to nurture and protect the emotional life of boys, and *It's a Boy!: Understanding Your Son's Development from Birth to Age 18*. Michael's next project is a book about camp.

**Q: So the million-dollar question is how can camp help raise healthy, positive, confident young boys and girls?**

**Michael:** I've been asking audiences for many years, "What are the sweetest moments of your childhood?" And most people remember moments that really belonged to them — a moment of challenge when mom and dad weren't hovering over them, a moment that was their own. It's almost the definition of camp, isn't it?

I think camp is a place where kids can grow. You go to camp, and you get to do the longer hike, the more rugged kayak trip, and use a piece of new machinery (in the case of my son at his art camp). Camp is nicely staged so you can see your progress. Our schools are so age segregated that kids don't get to compare up or down. A younger boy may not have a clue what they're doing in seventh grade, but at camp they can see what everyone is doing, the whole range of development. It gives them targets to shoot for.

**Rachel:** I agree. I think summer camp is one of the last refuges where you really can fend for yourself and grow unfettered for a while. It also offers new opportunities beyond what can feel like the suffocating atmosphere of school. If you're caught in a bad relationship [at school], for example, it's hard to believe that can change. Camp offers new relationship possibilities. For some kids, that's the kind of experiential learning they need to make a change back at home. Camp often helps children understand what a better friendship feels like.

**Michael:** Yes, it is true for both boys and girls that there's usually a popular set in school that defines your status, and you get locked in if you've been with the same people for years. At camp, the criteria for popularity are different, and kids have the opportunity to reinvent themselves. It's about trying out a new social identity. You get to be someone else and that's hugely liberating for kids.

**Q: What role do camp counselors play in that scenario?**

**Rachel:** Kids need to have trusting relationships with young adults. These relationships can be very defining in terms of how kids think about adults and trusting adults.

As it is, I think kids are more and more isolated from adults. Technology is allowing for more indirect communication. Having a relationship that's not based on achievement but community is really rare. More and more, those relationships are vital for kids.

**Michael:** Think about being a sixth-grader. When are you going to spend any length of time with a senior in high school? At camp, suddenly you're doing activities all day long with seventeen-, eighteen-, nineteen-year-olds who are having fun with you. That's genuinely exciting for kids.

**Rachel:** And girls believe young women more than they believe me, for example. There's an instant buy-in because those adults haven't quite become full authority figures yet. There's an openness to them that's really remarkable.

**Michael:** Boys, too.

**Q: So, Michael, what should camp counselors know about adolescent boys?**

**Michael:** The most important thing is that even though they cover it up, boys will have a full and deep emotional reaction to everything that goes on at camp. They may crack jokes, talk about sports, be raunchy; conversations are often narrow and limited, but that doesn't mean the boys are narrow



and limited. Remember that boys have the full range of feelings — fear, sadness, sometimes terror, neediness, boredom, and affection and love. It isn't really all about basketball, kayaking, or ropes courses. These are vehicles for a boy to test his own physical skills, to feel strong in his body, to test his confidence, and glimpse how he's going to be away from his parents.

Society seems to understand the vulnerability of girls; we see it on their faces. But boys almost seem shamed if you ask them if they're okay. Don't take them at face value.

**Q: What about girls, Rachel?**

**Rachel:** I think it's important not to confuse lots of emotions in girls with emotional intelligence. People often assume girls are good at managing their feelings just because they have so many of them, but a lot of adolescent girls have a hard time processing all that emotion.

**Q: Any specific suggestions for nurturing that camper-mentor relationship?**

**Rachel:** What girls really need is empathy. As a camp counselor your instinct is to want to fix a situation because you think, *I want to help that kid, and it's my job.* Don't underestimate the power of just telling a child that you understand how she feels and that you're sorry for what she's going through. Avoid knee-jerk, fixed responses. Empathy goes a long way, longer than most adults expect. What most girls remember about adults is not how the adult fixed a situation but the emotional support they provided. All kids want to be seen for who they are and be loved for that. Think about a unique characteristic each camper has and find a way to recognize that.

Also, remember your boundaries. There will be some kids who want to know personal things about you, and I really recommend as a policy to be careful about personal disclosure. What a camper is getting from you has nothing to do with your personal life and everything to do with the relationship you're having with that kid at that moment.

**Michael:** You have to teach young men how important they are to boys. You can't mess about with these relationships. A nineteen-year-old has to understand that the twelve-year-old thinks the older boy is a god. You can have fun and tease lightly, but you can't torment them. They're just too open and vulnerable.

When Rachel was saying that camp counselors have more credibility than older adults, that's a channel for good, for learning, for getting confidence, but it's a wide-open channel and you can really hurt a kid. Little boys like that big boys are funny and gross. But the big guys have to be careful, because it means everything to the younger ones.

**Q: What are some of the societal challenges, beyond bullying, that kids can bring with them to camp, and how can the counselors affect a positive change?**

**Michael:** I think the biggest challenge is that what it means to be a man is not clear to boys — knowing how to define masculinity in a meaningful way. Because being tough and strong doesn't get you where you need to get in the Information Age, but that's what many boys think about masculinity.

Thirty-five percent of American boys are not being raised in a home with their biological father. Among disadvantaged kids, those rates can be up around 60 or 70 percent. And the media images of men are so unfortunate. It's hard to find anything but nincompoop male characters. Think about the TV show *Two-and-a-Half Men*; the uncle has never grown up and the father is a ninny. So a camp counselor can fill an enormous hole in a boy's life and have a lifelong impact if it's a positive experience.

**Rachel:** One issue with girls is body image. A lot of girls will use the opportunity away from home to crash diet. Camps need to be tuned in to this. It can be individual girls engaging in this behavior, but there's also the social aspect, the wanting to be part of a group. A good rule of thumb at camp is you have to have something green on your plate. It's not just an issue of how much they're eating but what they're eating.

There are also issues like borrowing without asking, so camp can teach lessons about manners and respecting people's property.

**Q: Anything camp counselors should avoid — behaviors they need to be aware of in themselves?**

**Rachel:** There are always going to be a group of girls who are socially sophisticated. They are charming, and they make you feel so happy you became a camp counselor. It's very seductive, and you can forget there are other kids who aren't so "shiny."

Make sure you're not spending a disproportionate amount of time with a few

of the kids who are most compelling. The other kids *will* notice.

**Michael:** The boy equivalent is spending time with the athletes who can give you a game. It's less fun for a nineteen-year-old to play with the inept kids than the athletes, but they all need your attention equally.

**Q: Any advice for dealing with the camper who seems distrustful or afraid?**

**Michael:** First, remember they're kids away from their moms, and they need nurturance and care. With boys, sometimes you've got to take a different approach than with girls. You're very likely to get a denial from a boy. He thinks he needs to be strong. I encourage counselors to say, "We're going to do this thing. Many kids find it scary but you get through it, and if you're scared, you can let us know." Put the fear into the equation. When you give boys permission to feel afraid, they don't have to then disavow their own feelings.

**Rachel:** If a kid is not trusting you, take some time to have conversations about nothing to establish the relationship, and hope there'll be some payoff there. Some kids take longer. And some kids don't respond well to a focused attempt to talk to them. Don't take it personally.

**Q: Any parting thoughts you want to share?**

**Rachel:** As a counselor, you have to be careful to walk the line between what you're doing for yourself and what you're doing for the job. How these kids feel about you shouldn't matter so much that you get worried if they're upset with you. You can't become so invested that you become unable to set limits, because you are a disciplinarian in addition to a mentor.

**Michael:** But you should celebrate and enjoy the access you have, the kind of open channel you get to kids' hearts. And never underestimate how full of respect, admiration, and affection these campers are for you. They get incredibly attached to you, and for that reason you can't mess with their minds or tease them like you would tease a peer; they're too vulnerable.

At camp, kids get to see up close the process of growing up, and the counselors have a high level of responsibility in that. Camp is life-changing for you, but it's life-shaping for the eleven-year-old.

*Photos on pages 22 and 23 courtesy of Mountain Camp, San Francisco, CA; and Brian Zaro, Yosemite Sierra Summer Camp, Bass Lake, CA.*