

Learning from the BEST



Camp Hyanto – photograph by Fred Chartrand

What makes a great camp counsellor

By Hailey Eisen

By the shores of Lake Moffat, a group of teenage girls sit on a large rock, cheering as a camper eases into the water on skis. From the dock, Jeff McAlpine offers encouragement as the teen holds the water-ski rope and tries to steady herself before the boat picks up speed. At Camp Kodiak—a residential special-needs camp just north of Parry Sound—waterskiing is one of the most challenging and exhilarating activities. While a few girls calmly wait their turn, others look anxious, bouncing around and laughing nervously. “So many kids come down here for the first time, and they won’t even go into the water,” says McAlpine, 30, who works as a bunk counsellor and is the head of the water-skiing program. “My job is to help them build confidence while teaching them the skills they need to get up on skis.”

For those Kodiak campers who have attention deficit disorder, Asperger syndrome or another type of learning disability, the opportunity to overcome fears and accomplish something like waterskiing couldn’t be achieved without the patience and guidance of skilled counsellors.

“One summer we had a camper who had only one arm, and we worked with him until he managed to get up on the boom and ski around the lake,” says McAlpine. “It was so great for his self-esteem, and his parents were thrilled with his success.”

After working at the camp for nine years, McAlpine says his desire to help children succeed has pushed him to go back to school. A sales manager, McAlpine plans to return to university this fall to complete a bachelor of education degree. “The patience and skills I’ve learned at Kodiak will transfer well into the classroom,” he says.



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Almost half of Kodiak’s counsellors work as teachers during the school year. “Coming to camp has helped me understand how to better help kids with learning disabilities in the classroom,” says Colleen Hickey, an 11-year veteran of Kodiak and a Toronto-based phys-ed teacher. As waterfront director, Hickey oversees the camp’s Red Cross swim program.

A head counsellor, Hickey posts a weekly schedule in her group’s cabin so the girls know where they’re expected to be and when. “They learn that if we’re going to archery in the morning followed by swim, then they need to be prepared with running shoes, a bathing suit and a towel,” says Hickey. While she sometimes feels like a mother, brushing the girls’ hair and helping them keep their beds tidy, she hopes to impart a sense of independence and personal responsibility that the campers can take with them. “The amazing thing about camp is that you see more change in a child in three weeks here than you do in an entire school year,” she says.

Kodiak isn’t the only camp that employs teachers. Many camp counsellors study or work in education because of

the love and respect for children that camp helps to foster. “I completed teachers’ college last year and I’m going back to school to do a master’s (degree) in outdoor experiential education,” says Erica Hamel, a 23-year-old lead guide with PaddleFoot. Having spent the past two summers guiding teenagers on canoe and kayak whitewater adventure trips, Hamel realized how powerful the tripping experience was for kids and how much she enjoyed her leadership role.

For Hamel, being a good leader means growing and learning alongside campers. “I get a lot of the same things from PaddleFoot as the campers do,” she says. “It’s a sense of accomplishment and confidence that encourages you to be better and want more from life.”

Hamel ensures her campers accomplish their goals and feel comfortable with the daily challenges. Around the evening campfire, she debriefs them. “I want to see how they felt about steering a canoe for the first time or paddling down a particular rapid,” she says. “Then I know how to handle things the next day and feel confident that the kids are safe and happy.”

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Of course, the primary role of all camp counsellors is to ensure camper safety—something quality summer camps don't take lightly. Before campers arrive, almost all camps run a training session or “pre-camp,” where staff learn how to address medical conditions, bullying, homesickness and other potential issues.

This training, coupled with years of experience as a camper and counsellor, helped Adam Springer deal with a bullying situation that arose in his cabin last summer.

“When it comes to dealing with problems in the cabin, I often think back to my own days as a camper,” says the 19-year-old, who has spent the past 14 summers at Camp Couchiching, just outside of Orillia. “I was a troublemaker, but my counsellors did a great job dealing with my behaviour, while keeping me happy.”

During a two-week placement, Springer had to address an ongoing confrontation between two senior campers. “I pulled them both out of the cabin and took them to a sports field where we could sit quietly,” he recalls. “I took out a roll of cookies, sat the boys down and encouraged them to talk out a solution.” Springer says the cookies served as a distraction and the boys calmed down and started to talk. “By the end of it, they were both aware of how the other felt and realized that verbalizing their feelings felt so much better than physically attacking one another.”

For a good counsellor, dealing with issues often comes down to thinking on your feet while trying to put yourself in the camper's shoes. Many camps have turned their focus to prevention, training staff to keep campers busy and happy to avoid conflict altogether. At the Art Gallery of Ontario's day camp

in Toronto, for instance, behavioural management and group dynamics training was used last summer.

“While bullying is something you always have to watch out for, we believe that creating a positive environment for kids to express themselves creatively, while making time for outdoor play to burn off steam, helps form a balanced day and keeps kids happy,” says Brendan May, 20, the camp's lead counsellor.

Inside a huge, well-lit studio in the gallery's basement, kids of all ages work on art projects, including drawing comic strips and sculpting animals out of wax. May makes his rounds, crouching at each table, complimenting kids on their creativity and asking them to describe their work. “One of the best ways to ensure a positive camp experience is to spend daily one-on-one time with each camper,” says May, who spent 10 years as a camper and staff member at Camp Hurontario before starting at the AGO in 2008. “We also promote a community dynamic where kids are taught to work together and encourage one another.”

Many counsellors agree that in order to prevent homesickness, campers must be kept busy. “During free time, which we call ‘options’ at Cooch, I tend to hang out with one particular camper who has been homesick,” says Springer. “We go to the mess hall and have a bowl of cereal together or we play soccer or baseball; whatever it takes to keep his mind off being sad.”

Even some day-camp counsellors must develop methods to address homesickness. With kids as young as three taking part, Monday mornings can be tough. “Some of the kids are pretty upset when their parents first drop them off,” says

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Dawn Martin, a counsellor at Sportsplay Inc. and a University of Toronto phys-ed student. “But we turn that around by getting them excited to play their favourite games—always offering them one-on-one attention.”

Great counsellors, like Martin, also offer campers the opportunity to learn from and interact with experienced and skilled young adults. Camp counsellors tend to have unlimited energy and spend their entire day entertaining kids—something parents don’t always have time to do.

Outside on the lawn at one of Sportsplay’s Toronto locations, kids stand on each side of a volleyball net as Martin dumps a huge bucket of small, multicoloured balls onto the ground. “Clean up your room,” she shouts. Giggling and excited, the campers begin throwing the balls, overhand, to the other side of the net trying to clean up their “room.” “We call this implicit learning because the kids don’t even realize they’re being taught the motor skills they need to play sports,” she explains.

In fact, most skills learned at camp—from the patience and perseverance needed to learn to water ski, to the social skills needed to address conflict, to the confidence and independence required to function without parental supervision—are gained through play. The best counsellors achieve a balance between teaching life skills and allowing campers the space they need to experience things for themselves.



YMCA Camp Belwood – photograph by Mike Pochwat

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