

What is a Counselor?

American Camp Association

Somewhere between adolescence and adulthood there occurs in human development an age, which is physically and psychologically impossible. It is that unfathomable stage known as the camp counselor, a creature undefined by psychologists, misunderstood by camp directors, worshiped by campers, either admired or doubted by parents, and unheard of by the rest of society.

A camp counselor is a rare combination of doctor, lawyer, native and chief. He is a competent child psychologist with his sophomore textbook as proof. He is an underpaid baby-sitter with neither television nor refrigerator. He is a strict disciplinarian with a twinkle in his eye, a minister to all faiths with questions about his own. He is a referee, coach, teacher and adviser. He is the example of manhood in worn out tennis shoes, a sweatshirt two sizes too large and a hat two sizes too small. He is a humorist in a crisis, a doctor in an emergency, and a song leader, entertainer and play director. He is an idol with his head in a cloud of wood smoke and his feet in the mud. He is a comforter in a leaky tent on a cold night and a pal who has just loaned someone his last pair of dry socks. He is a teacher of the out-of-doors, knee-deep in poison ivy.

A counselor dislikes reveille, waiting in line, cabin inspection and rainy days. He is fond of sunbathing, exploring, teaching new games, and old car named Henrietta, and days off. She is handy for patching up broken friendships, bloody noses and torn jeans. Good at locating lost socks, fixing backpacking stoves, playing the ukulele and catching fish, he is poor at crawling out of bed on rainy mornings, remembering the salt and getting to bed early.

A counselor is a friendly guide in the middle of a cold, dark, wet night on the long winding trail to the bathhouse. She is a dynamo on a day off, exhausted the next day, but recuperated in time for the next day off.

Who but he can cure homesickness, air out wet bedding, play 16 games of lumni sticks in succession, whistle "Dixie" through his fingers, carry two backpacks, speak Pig Latin in French, stand on his hands, sing 37 verses of "boom chicka boom" and eat four helpings of Sunday dinner?

A counselor is expected to repair 10 years of damage to Stephanie in 10 days, make Justin into a man, rehabilitate Zach, allow Sarah to be an individual and help Mike to adjust to the group. She is expected to lead the most prized possessions of 13 campers much younger than she. She is expected to lead them in fun and adventure, even when his head aches; to teach them to live in the out-of-doors . . . even though she spends nine months of the year in New York, Chicago or Los Angeles; to teach indigenous activities . . . when she cannot even spell the word; to guide youngsters in social adjustment . . . when she hasn't even reached legal age; to ensure safety and health . . . with a sunburned nose, a Band-Aid on his thumb and a blister on his heel.

For all this he is paid enough to buy the second text in psychology, some aspirin, some new socks, two tires for Henrietta, and some new pro-deal gear. You wonder how he can stand the pace and pressure. You wonder if she really knows how much he is worth. And somehow, you realize you can never pay him enough when, as he leaves at the end of August, he waves good-bye and says, "See ya next year!"

