Training Counselors Role Models
The Basics and Beyond

by Ethan Schafer, Ph.D.

Children do much of their learning by watching the important people in their lives. Referred to as "observational learning" by social psychologists and cognitive scientists, most professionals who work with children simply refer to this process as role modeling. Role modeling, of course, is more than simply the act of mimicking adults by nearby children. Ask any camper about how the "role models" presented by various media outlets (certain athletes and "musicians" come to mind) influence their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and assuming they are being honest, you will get an earful. More likely, you will see their influence reflected in campers' behavior in any number of ways. Whether campers are able or willing to put the impact into words, their role models create one of the lenses through which they view the world.

The Science of Observational Learning and Social Cognition

The science behind the importance of role modeling is robust and has an extensive history. For those of you who can remember back to your introductory psychology classes, you probably remember one of the earliest and most famous studies of observational learning, the classic "Bobo Doll" studies of Albert Bandura. In a series of studies, Bandura documented the increased likelihood of boys and girls to exhibit aggressive behavior towards an inflatable doll after watching another adult act as a model by exhibiting aggression towards the doll him/herself. These studies sparked an explosion of research on how role models in a child's life influence behavior and learning. Combined with research on persuasion, psychologists have since identified several factors that increase the influence role models have on children. For camp professionals, some of the important factors include:

- Proximity: A role model that is physically closer to a child (e.g., in the same room, as opposed to watching on a monitor or television screen), is more likely to influence a child.
- Similarity: Role models who are similar on any number of physical factors, such as gender, ethnicity, or resemblance to other significant people in a child's life (such as a parent or peer).
- Likeability: A likeable role model (in the old days, researchers would be more cavalier about using terms like "attractive model," but I digress) is also more likely to have influence.
- Authority: Such as a teacher, an expert, or someone who has generally been presented to a child as someone to listen to, follow, and learn from.

Does this sound like anyone you work with? Camp counselors are likely to fill all of these criteria, and then some. As any educator or camp professional knows, a role model's behavior has at least as much (and probably more) effect on a child's learning compared to his or her words.

Camp staff are also role models regarding how to handle interpersonal relationships. Observing how adults communicate with each other, resolve conflicts, and manage complex emotion helps children form "mental maps" for campers to follow in their own lives. Some psychologists who research social cognition (a hot area of research right now, social cognition is the study of how we think about, perceive, and respond to social information) have referred to these maps as "interpersonal schemas." We all have "maps" in our heads that affect how we filter, organize, and respond to input from the environment. For example, when you meet someone, you have certain protocols to follow— involving handshakes, eye contact, and exchange of personal information.

The larger point is that previous experiences guide our actions, expectations, and sense of what to do in any interpersonal situations. Most often, we are not consciously aware of them. We don't consciously think, "Orient your body towards the person, put your hand out at the appropriate angle, ask for his/her name," etc. Schemas are constantly changing in response to information provided by the environment, and are another type of organizing framework through which children understand their world.

Of course, none of this is particularly newsworthy. We already know that camp counselors have huge impact on
campers—both positively and negatively. In most staff training programs, the concept of being a role model is probably alluded to in some fashion. This is a critical component of any staff training program, but we can do more. By adding a series of specific concepts and activities, we can give our staffs the tools to become more deliberate, effective role models for campers.

The Basics: Being a Good Example, Every Day

As mentioned, this is the easiest part of training camp role models, and will therefore only be covered briefly. Perhaps these aspects of your training program emphasize "do as I say AND as I do," concrete behaviors such as the importance of counselors showing up on time to activities, being responsible with their belongings, and following the same camp rules the campers do, etc. We can enhance the "basics" by integrating some basic aspects of developmental adolescent psychology.

First, remember that your adolescent staff (college students count as adolescents) make great zealots. They are, usually, quite passionate, righteous, and ready to "believe" in a set of ideals, especially those represented by your camp. We can channel their natural inclinations by underscoring the power that they, as nonparental authority figures, have on camper's emotional development. To introduce this concept, have the staff discuss who they think influences children today, for better or for worse. You are likely to get opinions about popular culture, laments about parents, and general negativity about kids. (Aside: Try not to laugh when you hear college students wax pejorative about the next generation of kids, especially when they speak with what others have called "the certainty of youth.")) Assuming this occurs, have your group facilitators point it out and remind them that children learn from role models whether they are positive or negative. Children will repeat what they see others do. In a sense, it is as simple as that.

We can play to adolescent staff's natural self-centeredness by reminding them that they are unique in terms of their role as nonparental authority figures. They are not family members (usually), teachers, or parents. They do not "come with" authority. Rather, their authority and influence comes from the relationship that they create and the examples they set. Challenge your staff to earn their place as role models by having them break into groups and specify how they will earn their status. To prevent them from focusing on less specific concrete behaviors like "getting to activities on time," give them a list of other categories and a certain number of slots to fill within those categories, like: List three ways you will model time management, organizational skills, conflict resolution, respect for others, etc.

Then, have the staff generate and share their most powerful role model experiences. It is most useful if they went to camp themselves and think of former counselors, but if not, they can think of siblings, cousins, teammates, or even parents and teachers. Have staff share positive and negative events, and then point out how much of an effect these experiences must have stayed with them. Every staff member should both know and feel the potential of their role, knowing that their behavior sets the standard of what is correct, what is "cool," and what should be emulated over the summer. Setting the tone regarding the emotional power of role modeling will help improve the chances that the following training activities will "stick."

Beyond the Basics: Integrating Role Modeling With Developmental Psychology

Help staff break down their influence as relationship role models. Ask staff to tie in their own personal experiences as a point of reference and then specifically discuss how they can "broadcast"—verbally and non-verbally—positive messages to campers. Remind them specifically that talking and explanations are only one way to teach, especially since you are focused on observational learning. Focus first on developmental aspects of observational learning based on age and gender.

Young Children (about ages 7 to 10)
Younger boys and girls will see counselors as giants among them, both physically and psychologically. I would use the term "worship" rather than "look up to" to describe how campers this age think of their counselors. We need to prepare staff for this phenomenon by helping make it predictable: Use real examples of young campers following counselors around, wanting to spend large amounts of time with them, talking like them, etc. Make sure that staff understand that the simple act of spending time with younger campers, rather than the nature of the activity, is the important part.
Although the current zeitgeist regarding measuring outcomes and getting "hard data" is helpful in many ways, it is critical to remember that not every aspect of child development needs to be measured, graphed, and analyzed. Special time together is inherently beneficial to campers and counselors.

"Tweens" (about ages ten to twelve)
Children this age are beginning to develop a stronger sense of identity in terms of who they are, what their own interests are, and a sense of what unique talents they have. Counselors can focus on role modeling several different things for children of this age, including attempting new activities, self-control when under stress, and solving problems with other counselors in a growth-promoting manner:

- Have staff literally act out common situations like these during training. Give them a vignette, like "It is the middle of the summer, you haven't had a day off in a while, and you are tired. An eleven-year-old camper who sometimes gets on your nerves asks you to spend time with her. She is persistent, and you are starting to get annoyed. Demonstrate what a good role model would do in this situation."
- A ten-year-old camper is having trouble getting along with the campers in his cabin. He can be bossy and domineering, and his cabin mates are starting to avoid him. You have already talked to him, but this does not seem to have affected his behavior. Use a role modeling situation to demonstrate more adaptive behavior for this boy.

Adolescents (about thirteen and older)
Role modeling appropriate boundaries, particularly between opposite sex campers and staff, regarding relationships, personal histories, and where to draw the line between camper and staff represents perhaps the biggest risk and potential area of growth at camp. Have counselors of children this age think of themselves as "relationship role models." Because of the relative closeness in age between adolescent campers and staff, I recommend spending extra time on these issues during training:

- A thirteen-year-old camper is very curious about your relationships with other staff members. He knows you spend most of your time off with a close group of friends and wants to know what you all do together. In fact, he seems to focus on counselor's business at the expense of spending time with other campers of his own age.
- You and some of your fifteen-year-old campers have gotten very close over the summer. There is a real sense of trust and respect between you. Unfortunately, you find out that they have been quite cruel to some of the less popular kids in the cabin, excluding them from activities and saying hurtful things about them. You are now in the difficult position of setting boundaries with a group you like a great deal, and will have to do and say things that upset them.

Counseling Staff
It is important to remember that younger staff will also see experienced staff as role models. Again, this is an important responsibility that should be emphasized and covered explicitly.

- You and another experienced staff member disagree over how to manage the challenging behavior of a cabin group that has begun breaking rules and pushing limits on a regular basis. Younger staff know the two of you have different styles, though in your own way, both of you are quite effective. Your task is to demonstrate how you would resolve this conflict in a way that sets a good example for younger staff in terms of communicating respectfully and achieving positive outcomes.
- You are not perfect, and have recently broken a major camp rule, and everyone on the staff knows it (Aside: Pick whatever would be a major infraction that is just short of triggering immediate dismissal at your particular camp). You need to role model how to accept responsibility and make amends for this mistake.

Notice the decision about how to resolve these situations is left to the staff member, and that we are not simply saying to them "What would you do if . . ." Actually demonstrating the combination of words and behaviors required in these situations is the critical piece. While the end result is important, the role modeling process leading up to it contains the most powerful opportunities for learning.
Role Modeling

Role modeling is arguably the most salient "delivery system" through which campers and staff learn and develop over the summer. Role modeling works in both the thousands of small, daily interactions that occur throughout the summer (the "basics"), and in the less common, more challenging situations listed above ("beyond"). Because of its importance, camp staff will benefit from making it a specific and values aspect of staff training.

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Originally published in the 2007 May/June issue of Camping Magazine.