

# BUILDING A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH CAMP PARENTS

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We began by talking about the impact of camp on the campers. We focused our attention on the benefits to the camper and that is how it should be. Campers are our first priority. Now, we focus on your second priority – your camp parents and guardians.

We need to build a relationship with parents that is based first of all on **confidence** that you **can** look after their child and secondly on **trust** that you **will** look after their child.

In today's world this is not easy. Even parents who were campers themselves and who personally know the benefits of camp are sometimes reluctant to allow their own children to attend camp.

Public television journalist, Steve Paikin, was interviewed for the latest *Our Kids Go to Camp Guide*. He was asked, "What advice would you give parents who are afraid to send their kids to summer camps?" His answer was frank and most refreshing, "Get over it. It's not about you. It's about your kids. Yes, you miss your kids while they're away. .But mine have all benefited significantly from the experience."

Then there are parents who do register their children but demand regular personal communication with their camper and/or try to tell you how to run your camp.

This is nothing new. In early communications about your conference, I was told that your theme was the whole camp family, parents included, and one specific issue was mentioned – helicopter parents. My first thought was, I've been away from directing for twelve summers. I **have** researched the subject for the second edition of my camp counsellor book in 2009, but I don't have personal experience with helicopter parents. But then a light went on and I realized, oh yes I do! The only difference is terminology. We hadn't yet coined the phrase "helicopter parent" – we called them high maintenance, demanding or annoying, but we learned to love them anyway!

We did our very best to build a relationship of mutual respect and trust with our parents. And it worked. One mother admitted to succumbing to the pleas of her daughter to allow her to return to camp with her friends although she had recently undergone major surgery. On arrival day, handing her over to our care, the mother justified her decision by saying, "I

know you'll worry about her as much as I do." She was wrong. I worried about her **more** than her mother would have.

Your relationship with your parents begins with that first phone call, first e-mail or a greeting at a camp fair. According to Jo'Ann Alderson, a communications expert, and author of the recently published book, *Connecting in the Faceless World*, 90% of business today is conducted and completed in a faceless environment. Yes, some camp directors still do home visits and yes, we do meet some prospective clients at camp fairs, Mission Fests or Children's Festivals, or newly-registered campers and parents at orientation sessions, but for the most part because of time constraints and distance, we are communicating with our prospective or current camper parents by phone, voice mail, e-mail, regular mail, text messages, websites, Facebook or Twitter. In the last twenty years, technology has provided dozens of new ways to communicate, but that does not mean we are building better relationships or achieving greater understanding. I cannot imagine anyone who enjoys the voice message maze: "If you want option A, press #1; if you want option B, press #2 "and on and on. If you are among the remaining diehards, who actually pick up a ringing phone and answer it "good for you!" Regrettably, you may be in the minority. Last fall, an OCA Board member called every day camp in Ontario to promote a workshop day event that he was chairing featuring Jo'Ann Alderson. He shared an interesting observation with me. In many cases, he did not reach a live body but was requested to leave a message on voice mail. And although he describes himself as a fairly layback guy who is not particularly critical, he felt that some of the folk he did speak with were not as professional and business-like as he had expected.

Last October, I attended his workshop thinking that Jo'Ann's message could be relevant to my remarks here. Given the reality that we are conducting much of our business without the benefits of face to face communication, Ms Alderson's session offered sound advice and copious suggestions on how to make our faceless communication most effective.

Coincidentally, a few days before her workshop, I had experienced exactly what she was talking about. One morning, my home phone rang and when I picked up, I heard a most garbled message. The caller was speaking very quickly in a monotone, and

I did not understand one, single, word. I assumed it was a telemarketer and I was tempted to hang up, but my curiosity got the better of me so instead I spoke a puzzled, "excuse me?" The speaker slowed her pace slightly and I caught one familiar word, the name of my ophthalmologist. I had to ask her to repeat her message for the third time and finally, I got the information – a reminder of my annual eye check-up. A few days later, I arrived at the office. Sadly, this receptionist's face to face communication was not much better. I approached the chest high counter and stood quietly waiting to be acknowledged. On the other side, I saw the receptionist with her head down, talking on the phone and staring at her computer screen. I waited patiently. A few minutes later, without looking up, she spoke, "Sir, how can I help you?" I remained silent. That forced her to finally look up and with embarrassment, repeat her question. "Opps. Sorry, madam. How can I help you?"

Luckily for that receptionist, I was not Jo'Ann Alderson. She would have told her, "Well for starters, you could phrase your question grammatically correctly, How **may** I help you? I assume that if you are the receptionist, you **can** i.e. you have the ability to help me."

Jo'Ann devotes a chapter of her book to training staff how to answer the phone to create a good first impression and communicate effectively. She sees this first contact as a significant part of your branding. She advises before picking up the phone, to sit up straight and put a smile on your face – why? – because by doing so, your voice portrays a positive tone. Some businesses actually have put mirrors in place for those answering phones to practice a pleasant facial expression. Then speak slowly and succinctly. "Hello. Thank you for calling Camp Mi-A-Kon-Da. My name is Catherine Ross. How may I help you?" Posture, tone, pace and volume are all important.

In her book, Jo'Ann prioritizes the methods of communication and their effectiveness.

- Face to face communication is still the most productive if you have done your research and preparation.
- A phone conversation ranks second for effective communication. If you are initiating the call she advises stating your name, business, the purpose of your call and **always** asking if this is a convenient time for the recipient.
- She cautions us that voice mail, e-mail and texting are **not** communication rather a one-way message. Your words may or may not be received as you intended. The recipient's frame of mind when opening the e-mail will colour the interpretation.

It is worth reading Jo'Ann's book for her advice on the choice of words in our written or spoken communications. Rather than "you must" or "you have to" she advises that you will get a more positive result with words such as "it is preferred" or "we suggest." If you say to a parent who has an issue, "That is our policy" – clang the gates shut and they hear the message "and we do not intend to change it; it is written in stone; it came down the mountain with Moses." However if you say, "We have developed this practice after looking at all the options, or carefully considering the safety factors or believing this is best for all our campers" you keep the gates open and invite dialogue. Not that you intend to change, but you have the opportunity to explain. If we choose our words carefully, we can appease rather than incense.

Think and double check every e-mail before pressing send. E-mail or texting is a more spontaneous and casual means of sending information, but we still need to be thoughtful, grammatically correct and professional. When I receive a business e-mail addressed to 'Hey guys', I cringe. Present yourself as a professional and you will be treated as a professional.

To ensure consistent and effective communication with your parents, consider creating a communications protocol, which identifies response times for phone messages and e-mails, **what** information is relayed **when** and **how** and regular updating of your voicemail, website and Facebook. I called a major communications firm on February 2 and listened to a voicemail message that told me that the office was closed for the holidays and would be open for business on January 10. Oops! If that was a camp phone and I was a camp parent listening to that message, I would think twice about sending my child to a camp that was that casual about detail. Strive in all your communication to be as succinct as possible. If you overload your parents with information, they may tune you out. Inform your parents how best to reach you during business hours in the off season and around the clock when their child is at camp in the event of an emergency.

For the first seventeen of my twenty years as a camp director on our wilderness island without hydro, I did not have a telephone. Absolute bliss! The nearest phone was on the mainland a mile away. We staffed this phone between two and three in the afternoon and between seven and eight in the evening for parents who needed to relay last minute information such as an intended visit or a change in departure travel plans. I know I would not get away with this arrangement today, but I would still convey the message very clearly to my parents that time spent with them on the phone or answering e-mails means less time for staff to spend with the campers to meet their needs. Or if you have room in

the budget, you could do as one Ontario camp has done, hire an extra staff person to deal exclusively with e-mails.

We did have an arrangement with a local resort three miles up the lake with a radio phone to deliver emergency messages at any time of the day or night. In seventeen years, I received only one message from a parent. On an arrival day, in the five hour period between the time a camper had left her parents and arrived at camp, a close friend of the camper had been killed on a seadoo at her cottage. The parents wanted Kathleen to be told by me with her counsellor present to support her rather than risking her learning about it unexpectedly from the radio or a newspaper. Our parents were well trained. They kept the complete camp information on file and referred to it for their answers. But they also had complete confidence that if there was the slightest cause for concern, I would be communicating with them immediately

Because of our communication limitations at camp, we were very particular about communicating with our parents quickly and thoroughly before the summer season. For ten months we worked to build a trusting relationship. I offered to visit the home of any prospective camper within a three hour drive of Toronto. I personally answered the camp business phone during and after office hours. I wrote personalized responses to every registration of a returning camper.

The education of your parents is every bit as important as teaching your campers. Parents need to understand and accept your philosophy. The camp director needs to know what the parents expect and be willing and prepared to meet those expectations. Similarly, the parents need to know what you expect of them. Our Kids Media has just published online my latest handbook for parents, *Preparing for Camp. the best time of a child's life*. This resource is easily available free to you and your parents. If your parents are clear on what your camp offers and what you can and will do for their child, serious problems and conflicts are eliminated.

For example: Camps' parent-visitor policies are all over the map. Some camps do not allow any visitors; some have one specific visitors' day each session while some have a wide open policy and allow anyone to visit at almost any time with adequate warning. Mi-A-Kon-Da fits into the third category simply because we are an island property with limited boat transportation and preferred to stagger our visitors. We also believed that the parents could enjoy the island, observe the activities and have a better visit with their daughter if we were not swamped with too many parents on any given day. I greeted each parent personally when the boat docked and then the parents walked off the dock to meet their waiting child. Parents could bring a picnic

or join us for lunch. We allowed dogs (on a leash!) as I knew some campers wanted to see their pets almost as much as they wanted to see their parents. Our visiting policy was grounded in our philosophy and refined if needed to serve the best interests of our campers. The complete policy and the philosophy behind it were carefully explained to our parents. For example, the parents knew that the entire visit took place on the camp property. For several good reasons, which we explained to our parents, we did not permit parents to take their child off the island during their visit.

However, one day while I was chatting with one set of parents, behind my back, I heard another mother ask my husband, if, since they had arrived in their own power boat, could she take her daughter off the island for a picnic. I then heard George answer, "No." And that was it. Not a single word of explanation, just "No." I quickly finished my conversation and walked over expecting to begin damage control, but the mother simply smiled and walked away. She wasn't surprised. She knew the answer before asking and was just confirming or maybe testing. Nevertheless, I suggested to George that he might have followed up with a few gentle words of explanation. He assured me he would have if the mother had objected.

George and I had very clearly defined roles. For tax purposes, he was the owner and I was employed as the camp director. I dealt with campers, parents, staff and program. He dealt with the food service, the facility and the business administration. We rarely crossed wires. The partnership worked. We grew a thriving camp business and we're still married!

If parents make exceptional demands, you need to ask yourself, whose needs are being met – the child's or the parents'? One director told me of a parent who requested that her daughter e-mail home every day and as well, she was to take a daily shower. The director explained that neither requests were logistically possible if the child went on a canoe trip nor was a daily e-mail conducive to the child experiencing her short period of independence from home. At another camp, the directors decided to embrace technology by creating a "hot spot". Every day for ½ hour after lunch the campers could retrieve their cell phone and make calls. In fact, only 1% of the campers took advantage of this offer. Is it the campers who need constant contact or the parents?

For the most part, camp parents are co-operative and enthusiastically supportive. They are your best form of advertising. However, I have no doubt that you have all been challenged at some time to deal with a demanding or difficult parent.. At such times you need to have confidence in your own and your staff's experience and abilities and do what is best

for your campers. If one day, in a weak moment, you are tempted to succumb to a parent's unreasonable demands or threats, I want you to think about Stacey.

Stacey is a former camp counsellor, a teacher and now a vice principal in a school in Brampton, Ontario. Stacey is an excellent teacher. When she was teaching science in a senior public school in Toronto, her students consistently won awards in Science Fairs. One day, while teaching a lesson about Pavlov and his dog, one young boy was behaving badly and disrupting the class as was his habit. In the context of the lesson, Stacey said to him, "I need to condition you to behave just as Pavlov conditioned his dog."

The child went home and told his mother, "The teacher called me a dog." The mother called Stacey and very politely asked for an interview to discuss the situation. Stacey was delighted to get the mother involved in the solution. However, when the mother appeared, the meeting quickly deteriorated. She began screaming at Stacey and threatening to take the matter to the School Board to have her fired. Stacey suggested moving the interview to the principal's office to solicit his help. After the mother left, the principal instructed Stacey to do as the mother requested, make a public apology to the boy in the classroom. This was not the first time the mother had made a fuss but he did not want to risk her going to the Board. Stacey did as she was told. She apologized to the class and then handed in her request for a transfer. Whose needs were met? The boy is still misbehaving, jeopardizing the education of the rest of the class and the school lost a good teacher.

Fortunately, our consistent efforts to communicate with parents and gain their confidence were successful. In twenty years as a camp director, I can count the number of serious complaints on one hand.

In each case I took the Steve Paikin approach – "It's not about you; it's about your kids." – I did what I felt was best for the camper. I did not succumb to the parents' demands. Only once, that I am aware of, did I lose a renewed registration because of my stand. I had a parent who was a very keen canoe tripper. He was most anxious that his eight-year-old daughter be equally enthusiastic. He knew that all our campers regardless of age could choose to go on a canoe trip if they passed the simple, basic qualification which included safety rules, a controlled dumping and bow strokes. The way the program worked, young campers were scheduled to each activity once; then with the exception of swimming lessons, which were compulsory, they chose their own activity schedule. Sarah chose not to return to canoeing despite repeated persuasion and encouragement from her counsellor and me. She

pursued her own interests and attended almost every activity but canoeing. When Sarah returned home that first summer, I received a letter from her father expressing his extreme disappointment that Sarah had not experienced a canoe trip. He agreed to send her the next summer if I was willing to overlook the compulsory requirements and send her on a canoe trip anyway. I refused. Sarah went elsewhere.

Gaining the confidence of your parents depends on your doing a good job. It is an awesome responsibility to care for other people's children. Thankfully the camp director is not doing this job alone. On April 2010, our new Governor General, David Johnston, was quoted in the *Globe and Mail* as saying, "For me the definition of leadership is recognizing your total dependence on the people around you." At camp that is all your staff including maintenance, office and kitchen staff, section heads and young counsellors. It is essential to train your staff well to equip them to do a good job for you. The training is followed up with encouragement, supervision, support, evaluation and recognition. They deserve your praise when they do a good job and they need your support if they don't. Broadcast their skills, talents and qualities to your camper parents. This will increase their confidence that these young people can indeed look after their child.

This prompts me to say a word about cultivating the support of the parents of those young counsellors. At the end of one summer, a very valued staff member mentioned that that her parents were urging her not to return on staff the following summer. They felt that it was time to stop playing at camp and get a real job. I responded by writing a letter to the parents of all the members of my counsellor staff thanking them for producing such wonderful young women. I described the demands of a typical camp day and the challenges of the many atypical events. I told them how one of their daughters had calmly steered young campers around a rattlesnake on a portage path; how another had helped to monitor the diet of a diabetic camper, how their daughters had endured a lengthy underwater search until the camper who had neglected to remove her buddy tag from the swim board was found in her tent. The parents were rightly impressed. Having opened their eyes to the significance and growth opportunities of a counsellor's job, I kept some of my experienced staff longer.

Finally let me commend you for your attendance at this event. This tells me that you are open to learn and improve your own performance as a camp leader. I hope it also means that you are willing to share your experience and expertise with your colleagues and to mentor those new to this profession. No camp exists in a vacuum. What happens at your camp whether good or bad will be discussed in homes, at dinner parties, in offices, in

coffee shops and on ski lifts by hundreds of parents in hundreds of places throughout the province and beyond. We want to be sure that what they are saying will be positive and send more campers to your camps this summer – the very best place for them to be and to belong.

**References:**

*Connecting in the Faceless World*, Jo'Ann Alderson  
<http://www.joannalderson.com/>

*Preparing for Camp*, Catherine Ross, available in e-book on *Our Kids Media* website  
<http://www.ourkids.net/ebooks/preparing-for-camp-ebook.php>

**Catherine Ross** is author of *How to be a Camp Counsellor...the best job in the world!*, *Preparing for Camp*, (e-book), *The Mi-A-Kon-da Story*, and *Tanamakoon: Where We Will Never Grow Old*. She is the former Owner/Director of Camp Mi-A-Kon-Da, an Executive Member of Canadian Camping Association/Association des camps du Canada, a Board Member Kids in Camp charity, a former Board Member of the Ontario Camps Association, and Past President Society of Camp Directors.  
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