

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN & YOUNG ADULTS

As volunteers, you must provide each camper with a sense of stability, caring and welcome. Younger campers often need a volunteer's help, while older campers tend to need counselor guidance. All campers need volunteers who are present with them both at designated times and informally. Here's an overview of where different age groups stand developmentally.

AGES 8 to 10

- Respond affectionately to volunteers who tend to their needs
- Consider the volunteer's role and capabilities to be very important
- Enjoy volunteers who have a sense of humor and take the time to play/interact with them
- Are learning what it's like to leave home and parents for extended periods (day-long)
- Have an attention span about as long as this sentence
- Desire acceptance from own age group
- Enjoy close friendships with playmates and express selves freely in art and play
- Enjoy competition related to their standing in the group
- Like group games and activities, but want everyone to obey stated rules and regulations
- Fairness and rule following are important
- Identify strongly with their gender and age group
- Need rest periods
- Tend to be loyal to authority

AGES 10 to 12

- Respond to volunteers who effectively channel their tremendous energy
- Tend to idolize volunteers who measure up to their expectations — be careful here
- Want to be together in groups, like their bands
- Have longer attention spans and patience to work for short-term goals
- Form cliques and friendships within own age groups
- Define status through excellence in skills and knowledge of grown-up things
- Are concerned with physical size and appearance — watch what you say
- Girls at upper age level become aware of romantic attractions

AGES 12 to 15

- Respond to volunteers whose intelligence is as varied as their skills
- Need volunteers who genuinely listen to them
- Tend to view their world fairly idealistically; are uncomfortable with "gray" situations
- Peer group rather than adult opinion is their source of wisdom
- Want surreptitious reassurance of adult supervision
- Value conformity; find it difficult to stand as an individual
- Hormone adjustments trigger intense feelings and emotions
- Influenced by popular adults and teen idols, the hero worship and crush stage
- Long interest span and increased capacity for self-discipline
- Often prefer competition outside the groups rather than with friends in own group
- Idealistic about the world at large
- Are seriously concerned with personal appearance, frequently self-conscious
- Romantic relationships emerge as awareness of sexuality develops
- May start to engage in relational aggression and gender intensification

AGES 15 & UP

- Respond to volunteer members who recognize their emerging adult perspectives but who tolerate occasional lapses to adolescent antics
- Risk-taking emerges as a developmental task; these kids need to take risks but also have to learn how to assess their readiness for the risk
- Desire for independence and freedom
- Prestige and belonging to the power group is valued (the cool clique)
- Ability to concentrate and specialize in selected skills and interests
- Are learning the distinction between idealism and reality
- The skills of altruism begin to emerge as they give self to others
- Capable of developing romantic attachments with depth of feeling

PLAYING FAVORITES & HERO WORSHIP

Volunteers often become the object of special attention and adoration by campers. This attention must be channeled in a healthy way. Keep in mind that a certain amount of “hero worship” is a normal part of growth and development. While volunteers may have little control over the development of their growing fan base or the way these campers approach them, volunteers *do* have control over the way they choose to respond.

- **Don't play favorites.** Try not to show certain campers special attention, no matter how awesome they are. There's no reason to cut off all care and concern. Simply treat an admiring camper as you would any other camp week attendee.
- **Never gossip.** Conversely, while it is not humanly possible to like everyone, please keep personal preferences about others to yourself. Fight the urge to gossip or express bias toward particular individuals or groups and stay outwardly objective and impartial. **NEVER EVER talk badly about a camper or volunteer to another camper. EVER.**
- Stay positive. Provide as many positive comments to campers as you can. A rule of thumb: For every negative comment that escapes your lips, there should be five to seven positive comments that follow.

APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE FOR VOLUNTEERS

- Be firm, as a volunteer mentor, about using appropriate words and gestures to express yourself.
- Be especially sensitive to slang, words associated with cursing, and hand gestures; these often have different connotations to those who are listening.
- Don't tolerate bad language, such as four-letter words.
- **Be consistent** about what is and is not acceptable and always model that standard
- Campers will model the volunteer — and **walls have ears**. Be extremely conscientious about what you talk about, where you do that, and who may be listening.
- Hateful/negative talk by some campers is often shocking and believable to other youth. Keep your ears attuned to conversations around you, and intervene when you note inappropriate language or gestures.
- Children, even teenagers, are not always adept at understanding sarcasm. Thus, please refrain from teasing or using sarcasm, even if gently, and even if the campers are being sarcastic with each other. They listen and interact with you differently, and chances of misinterpretation and hurt feelings are much greater coming from you.
- Consider the difference between offering information and proselytizing. Respect that campers come from families with varying beliefs and backgrounds. Try not to impose your beliefs on others or judge differences between belief systems.