

## Hurray for counselors!

It's official, counselors are the bomb! An institution no less than the vaunted *Old Grey Lady* – aka [The New York Times](#) – has as much as said so in a Style section [Parenting piece](#) by psychologist Michael Thompson, Ph.D., a school and camp consultant. (Dr. Thompson is also the author of *Homesick and Happy: How Time Away from Parents Can Help a Child Grow*.)

Now, brace for the title of Dr. Thompson's New York Times piece – Why Camp Counselors Can Out-Parent Parents – a daring do of a claim if ever I heard one.

But he makes a great case.

## Here's looking at you, kid

Arguing that in today's society children are too often segregated from older children and so largely experience adult-led instruction only, whether from parents or teachers, Dr. Thompson says there's a void in kids' lives in terms of learning from "older children." He says this creates tensions in adult-child relationships when there's not a "bridge generation" to help fill the gap.

This is compounded in the case of kids learning from and obeying parents. Ingrained patterns of relating in families often get in the way of discipline and behaving on the one hand (cleaning up, following rules, listening to advice) and creativity and horizon-expanding experiences (trying new things, trusting instincts, taking chances socially and in activities) on the other hand.

But, Thompson says, the good-looking, appealing, accessible and heroic (in the eyes of kids) "young adults" aged 17-25 who populate camp programs as the leadership – from counselors-in-training to department heads – are in the sweet spot where they can both inspire greatness in kids and achieve obedience all within the idyllic world of camp.

## Getting away from it all

Part of this is because there are fewer distractions at camp. This is particularly true in those camps which, like Camp Scully, forbid videos, cellphones, and the Internet.

But it's also because of the close quarters, short time together, and need to maintain order to keep things running smoothly. In the end, camps are great places for children and young teens to "get with the program," in the happiest fun-in-the-sun kind of way, of course.

Dr. Thompson writes,

College-age students possess a completely different kind of authority than do parents, and they put it to good use getting children to set tables, make beds, keep track of their clothes, take showers, take turns and, more important, take risks and accept challenges that would melt parents into a puddle of anxious empathy. These young adults often teach complex, challenging life-and-death skills: sailing, horseback riding, rock climbing, whitewater kayaking and survival techniques. They also teach character and community, caring and sacrifice. And they do it all in an environment free of electronics: summer camp.

Wondering how these college-aged counselors can work such magic, Thompson cites the work of Erik Erikson, author of *Childhood and Society*, saying that Erikson reminds us that not all learning comes from "systematic instruction." In preliterate societies and in non-literate pursuits, he points out,

“much is learned from adults who become teachers by dint of gift and inclination rather than by appointment and *perhaps the greatest amount is learned from older children*.

Children love to learn, but they get tired of being taught by adults. Children want to learn from older children, and, at a camp that means older campers, C.I.T.’s (counselors in training) and camp counselors. They want to live with them, emulate them and absorb them.

Thompson is a big advocate of no-tech summer camps, suggesting that parents will likely see great gains in maturity, respect, and initiative when kids get a chance to get away from parental rule and frankly, parental vibes (and I say this as a parent myself). He says that by filling in the gaps with “older children/ young adults” in the form of the miraculous camp counselor, kids begin to step up in the best way.

## A two-way street

I have to admit, I’ve certainly seen the hero worship side of this at camp, and felt it myself. We all have our favorite counselors – the one for whom we’ll spotlessly make the cot, for whom we’ll swim the butterfly stroke, and make a crafty card to send to after camp is over.

And the learning that campers get from these counselors comes easily. It’s almost as if, as Thompson says, relationships of older and younger kids are a missing piece in modern culture.

But counselors get something from this, too. It’s a chance to try their wings at holding the line, knowing as they do that the entire ethos and reputation of a camp rests on their emulating good behavior and support of the rules. Here at Camp Alleghany we’re consistently fortunate in this regard, with a competitive pool of highly qualified applicants eager to grow into adulthood in the role of camp counselor.

Of course, nothing that Thompson writes is designed to undermine parents or the primary role of parenting; quite the opposite. His aim is to support that role by showing that we parents can’t do it all, nor should we be expected to.

Maybe it does take [a village to raise a child](#). It’s just that that village might be in the woods, for three weeks in the summer, with the cool (but responsible) kid to teach you the ropes, and watch out for you too.