

Rites of Passage

Camp Pays Off in Youth Development, Happiness, Health, and Safety

by Stephen Wallace, M.S.Ed.

For years sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists have mourned the loss of traditions marking important childhood "rites of passage." In earlier American culture, movement toward adulthood was accompanied by more ritualistic, meaningful celebrations of transition to newfound independence and responsibility to the family and community.

In an increasingly complex, dispersed, and fast-paced society, summer camp remains one of the final frontiers for young people seeking formal affirmation of advancing maturity and, ultimately, initiation into adulthood. Through structured, goal-oriented activities taught and supervised by authority figures and role models, children at camp benefit from communal observance of achievement — whether in small-group or all-camp settings.

Nurturing Good Behavior

These are not insignificant observations for parents seeking for their children environments that are both rife with opportunities for growth and nurturing of behaviors that hold the promise of making poor choices less likely. Indeed, absent reasonable recognition of their early milestones, many young people seek alternative routes to "maturity," including drinking, drugging, dangerous driving, and early intimate sexual behavior.

Partnering With Parent — Youth Development at Summer Camp

The truth is that while parents offer the first, best shot of positively influencing youth, other influential adults may offer the best, last shot. Where's the proof? Working in tandem, parents and camp professionals have achieved success toward realization of the critical youth development goals identified by ACA in Directions: Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp

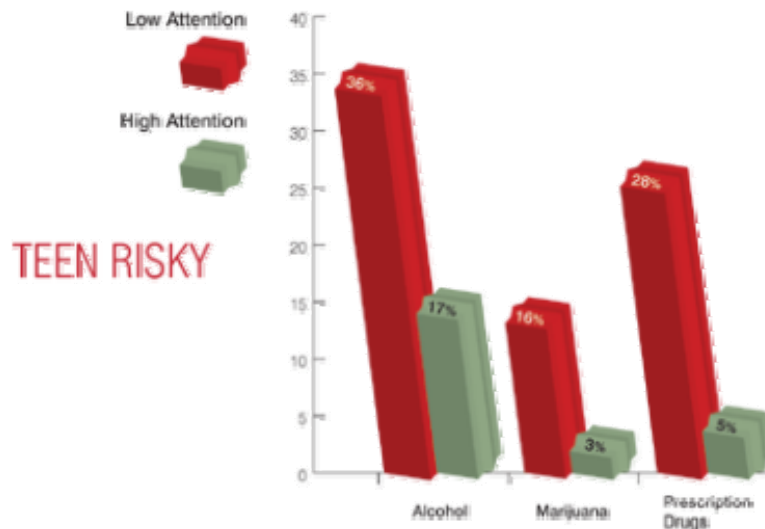
Positive Identity	Physical & Thinking Skills
Self-Esteem	Adventure & Exploration
Independence	Environmental Awareness
Social Skills	Positive Values & Spirituality
Leadership	Values & Decisions
Friendship Skills	Spirituality
Social Comfort	
Peer Relationships	

Experience.

In a study of more than five thousand families from eighty ACA-accredited camps conducted between 2001 and 2004, parents, camp staff, and children reported significant growth in many of these important areas.

Sense of Self

The value of childhood gains in identity, independence, and peer relationships is similarly highlighted in a SADD/Liberty Mutual *Teens Today* study linking each to an overall "Sense of Self." That report found that young people with a high Sense of Self more often report feeling smart, successful, responsible, and confident than do their low Sense of Self counterparts. They also more frequently cite positive relationships with parents and are more likely to avoid alcohol and drug use. Of course, parental involvement strongly correlates with teens' Sense of Self and the decisions they



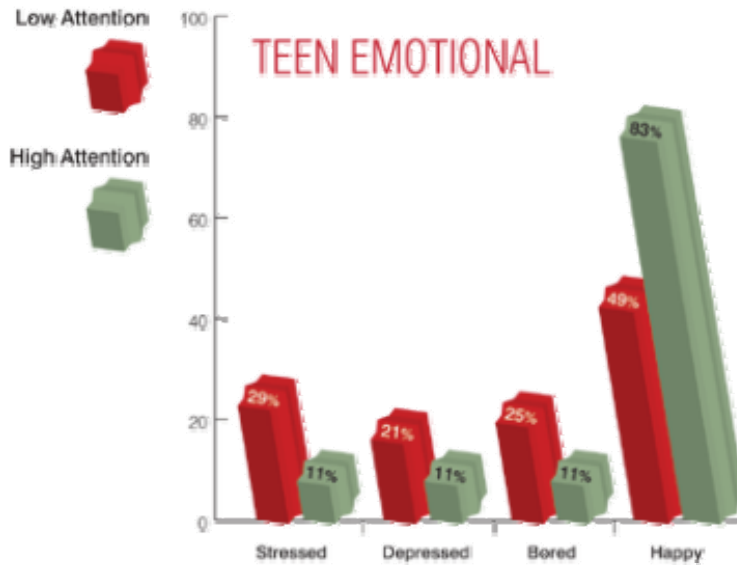
make.

Just as important, the data points to the value of the summer camp experience and the role that counselors play in positively enhancing a child's Sense of Self by:

- Supporting a wide sampling of interests, activities, and age-appropriate behaviors;
- Encouraging separation from parents and age-appropriate independence in decision-making; and
- Teaching peer-to-peer social skills and facilitating (positive) peer relationships.

Positive Risk-Taking

Also corroborating the efficacy of ACA's findings is SADD/Liberty Mutual data suggesting that young people who take the very types of positive risks that camps promote are 20 percent more likely to avoid destructive behaviors than are those who do not. They are also more likely to describe themselves in positive terms and to report they often feel



happy.

Adult Inattention

Despite overwhelming evidence of the saliency of adult attention, a new *Teens Today* report from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group reveals that almost half of high school teens say that their mom and dad miss the boat when it comes to communicating about and recognizing or celebrating what they consider to be meaningful life events during their adolescence. Not surprisingly, these teens are more likely to engage in destructive behaviors.

According to the study, high school teens whose parents pay the least attention — 42 percent — to significant transition periods, such as puberty, school change, and key birthdays, are more likely than teens whose parents pay the most attention — 18 percent — to engage in high-risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use. They are also more likely to engage in early sexual activity.

The *Teens Today* research also highlights the effect of attention on another significant teen rite of passage: driving. For example, teen drivers who report high levels of parental attention are significantly more likely than those who report low levels of parental attention to say they never speed (45 percent vs. 14 percent). The data also suggests that these teens are more likely to wear seat belts while driving and are less likely to drive while impaired or to ride in a car with an impaired driver.

Mental Health

[Other Key Findings from Teens Today](#)

Young people who receive the least attention also appear susceptible to feelings of boredom and depression and are more than twice as likely to report daily stress. Conversely, teens who receive the most attention are significantly more likely to say they feel happy every day or almost every day.

What About Younger Children?

While younger teens also report inattention (fewer than one in three middle school students cites high levels of attention), they tend to fare better than their high school counterparts. This trend supports the thesis that a "pseudo-maturity" imposed on older adolescents, in part by a society that applies an ever-pervasive pressure to succeed, leads even the most caring of adults to doubt the necessity of paying much attention to growing teens.

Along with a shorter childhood, ushered out by a typically younger onset of puberty, and an extended adolescence, ushered in by an increasingly protective culture and elongated academic preparation, this detachment has brought about a vast, vague period of human development. It is during this time, more than ever before, that young people seek out acceptance into adulthood, anxious to demonstrate their almost-adult status.

Other Significant Adults

While young people need, and desperately want, their parents to pay adequate attention to the "important" things (some say their parents pay too much attention to the "wrong" things), they also look to other important adults as barometers of their progress in an uncertain world. Much of what they think of themselves during this critical transition phase is a direct reflection of how they believe others — including their camp counselors — perceive them. That is precisely why camp staff is uniquely empowered to satisfy at least some of the attention needs of children as they climb the ladder toward adulthood, conquering a seemingly endless array of developmental "tasks" along the way.

Rites of Passage and Summer Camps

There are three important ways in which summer camps — and their staffs — can help young people enjoy safe, healthy rites of passage.

First, they can recognize key adolescent life-transitions. Counselors can aid teens in building bridges between whom they were, whom they are, and whom they are becoming. In turn, those connections help teens to crystallize their search for identity and purpose, preparing them for a less egocentric, more collectivist role in society.

Secondly, they can encourage campers' participation in activities embedded with opportunities of measurable progression toward accomplishment of standardized achievements (e.g., awards) or goals (e.g., completion of projects).

Finally, they can offer unique opportunities for increased responsibility — especially for younger campers — they may not have elsewhere and that carry with them inherent feelings of maturity and independence.

Tradition and Ceremony

Summer camps are chock-full of meaningful age-related traditions — and accompanying ceremony — that help young people to mark progress while demonstrating to others that they are, in fact, growing up. Traditional recognitions of passage link generations through tangible representations of physical, and sometimes subtle, social and emotional change.

Advances and Retreats

Easier said than done? For sure. Actually pinpointing when transitions have taken place can be tricky.

In an adult narrative describing the experience of youth, Kevin Arnold, the principal subject of the 90s hit television show *The Wonder Years*, noted, "Growing up is not so much a straight line as a series of advances and retreats." This is a keen observation on adolescent movement toward adulthood.

Most people tend to think of maturation as linear, beginning at point A and ending at point Z. In reality, as young people mature they move back and forth along a continuum of growth, showing demonstrable signs of progress one day, only to awaken the next seemingly further behind. This phenomenon marks both their uncertainty with all things new (physical, social, and emotional) and their antipathy toward the whole developmental process to begin with.

Understanding that movement and the context in which it occurs is critical in recognizing the challenges teens face in their daily lives and what may or may not constitute important passages.

Identify significant teen transitions.

Important transitions in adolescence can be a one-time thing, such as a first date, first job, or first driver's license, or the gradual progression toward maturity. Figuring out which transitions are most important to your camper is a critical first step in helping him or her transition to adulthood. What "counts" for one young person may not matter much to another. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Tune in to the things that seem important in his daily life.
- Notice how she spends her days so you can flag changes.
- Ask how he feels about different transitions.
- Note how she talks about transitions with friends.
- Talk about important transitions in your own adolescence.
- Watch for signs of happiness, joy, stress, anxiety, or depression surrounding change.

Communicate about and recognize or celebrate important life events.

Sending the message that you are "dialed in" to your campers as they take significant steps along the path to adulthood is an important way to say, "I care about you, and I hear you!" Teens look for signals that they are making real progress toward becoming adults and care very much what you think about them, even if they don't always show it. Here is what you can do:

- Talk regularly — and casually (they hate "the big talk") — about the transitions you see them tackling.
- Recognize these transitions through small privileges, words, or deeds.
- Celebrate group transitions with a pizza party, special activity, or assembly talk.

Tips for Adolescent Transitions

Identify important transitions.
Communicate about or recognize and celebrate these important life events.
Encourage young people to explore the many healthy growth opportunities typically offered in the summer-camp setting.

SADD

SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions) sponsors peer-to-peer education and prevention programs in ten thousand chapters in middle schools, high schools, and colleges nationwide.

Liberty Mutual Group is one of the largest multi-line insurers in the property and casualty industry. Offering a wide range of products and services, including private passenger auto and homeowners insurance, Liberty Mutual Group employs 37,000 people in more than 900 offices throughout the world.

Growing Up in the Twenty-First Century

In a culture largely devoid of formal "rites of passage," and too often unobservant of the few that exist, young people may make up their own. Far too frequently they include drinking, drugging, and other potentially destructive behaviors. By paying attention to the important transitions of childhood and adolescence, influential adults — including camp professionals — can make it less likely that poor choices will become a child's self-constructed mileposts along the path to adulthood.

Encouragingly, six years of SADD/Liberty Mutual research make clear the incredibly influential role that caring adults can play in guiding young people toward safe, healthy choices. This latest report provides even clearer examples of how — underscoring the payoff for paying attention.

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