

OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTER FOR SOUTHERN ILLINOIS
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Shall I Decentralize My Camp?

by

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The camp should be built and maintained on a philosophy

THAT considers camp as primarily educational; as an opportunity for the closest application of democratic ideals and religious precepts to the problems of living together in social groups.

THAT realizes the twofold unique opportunity that camp alone has of bringing about growth in children (1) through group living and (2) through getting close to their natural surroundings; and that plans program with this twofold opportunity in mind.

THAT is based on the premise that no matter how well-planned the activity itself, unless every camper participating has had a hand in making the plans and the preparations, and will have a hand in the necessary follow-up, the activity will not be as complete or meaningful an experience as is possible, and can in some instances prove harmful; that children learn best the things they actually experience, and the camp motivates its program so as to cause children to do things for themselves and solve problems on their own.

THAT provides for camp to be so set up that children are constantly in situations offering the optimum opportunity for serving others first and making self secondary to the group.

THAT places emphasis on leadership, fully realizing that the counselor living with the camper is the most important single element in the camping situation.

THAT realizes, no matter what philosophy or program plan exists in the minds of camp leadership, camp from the point of view of the campers is fun and should be so run that the campers and staff find it is fun.

With this philosophy in mind, the following recommendations are made specifically as to program and the setup it calls for:

1. The staff should have a pre-camp conference and training period of about a week at camp each year, in order (1) to understand thoroughly the philosophy, purpose, traditions, camper and staff personnel, and physical setup and equipment of the camp, (2) to evaluate camp programs of the past and evolve better program aims and plans for that particular season, and (3) to increase their own abilities and skills.

2. Campers should be housed in canvas shelters of various kinds appealing to the imagination of the various age groups.
3. The campers should live in groups of about seven to nine (divided in general on the basis of age) with two adult counselors per group: to get the full benefit of living closely with others, with the fun and responsibilities inherent therein; to get the greatest possible understanding and guidance of the counselors.
4. The groups should be semi-independent, the group planning and carrying out its own program and also entering into the larger aspects of community living with its responsibilities and the opportunities it holds for fun, enrichment, and service.
5. The program of each of these groups should evolve from the group itself through the democratic process, and should partake of centralized and small-group activities as all of the groups see fit.
6. The program content (through staff training) should give constant consideration to the opportunities inherent in and peculiar to the out-of-doors; it should bring campers closer to a firsthand understanding of our natural resources and cause them to solve some of their own problems connected with man's basic needs.
7. The program should give primary emphasis to helping the camper discover himself, his place in the group, his contribution to it, his understanding of how people are to live together; and it should emphasize skills only as they contribute to this primary aim.

HOW TO BEGIN

If the director is running a traditional camp and wants to change to decentralized camping, he might do well to start with an outpost camp of one group and two well selected counselors. He should give this group every opportunity to enjoy a rich program and not have them feel they are missing the most exciting events in the main camp program. He should see that they either come to these affairs or have something equally exciting in their own outpost. Every time they join the main camp for meals or other gatherings, reports of their experiences can be given by some of their group; these might be praised and "glamourized" by the director.

They might build a second campsite nearby and hold open house for the whole camp to visit their camp and the new one they have built; or ask two groups near their age to come help do the lashing of the shelters after the saplings have been cut and trimmed. They might cook supper or prepare some refreshments for the guest groups. Following this, the new or guest camp might be opened for use by other groups for two days and nights at a time or longer. The first outpost group could serve as the teachers or general overseers of this campsite.

In this way, group after group might get a glimpse of life in the small camp. Perhaps this should go on throughout a season. Then a survey of the experience should show the director the state of readiness which exists among staff and campers. Usually, however, groups will have been asking the director all season for a chance to stay a week or so at this second outpost. He may see fit to allow a group to do this while working on a third campsite. An announcement at the end of such a season about the future plans to create more small camps may get the campers and staff planning ahead with good attitudes toward small-camp life.

Perhaps it will take several seasons before the whole camp becomes decentralized. As soon as more of the camp enters into its own small-group program planning than is taking part in centralized scheduled activities, the battle is won for decentralized camping. When the director realizes that many of the all-camp events no longer help but now may actually hinder small camps by taking time from their own plans, then decentralized camping can really get under way.

Though this method of approaching decentralized camping is perhaps typical of the process experienced by most decentralized camps to date, there is no need for the new camps coming into existence and camps of the future to waste time and money setting up a traditional camp, if the eventual goal lies in the direction of decentralized camping.

What is necessary for a new decentralized setup? Of course the answer lies somewhat in the size of the total camp. There need be no hierarchy of administrative heads. The nearer the director remains to the counselor, the shorter the line of approach from counselor to director, the better. Therefore the small camp is highly desirable. Many camps have held camper capacity to between 80 and 100, and have felt this quite an ideal camp community, conducive to the best staff relationships and general camp spirit. Rather than increase much beyond this, they have built other camps separate and complete.

A few paragraphs are not sufficient, however, to answer the question of "How to begin," either in changing from the traditional or centralized camp or in beginning from scratch. Actually each of the following chapters attempts to answer that question in a different area of responsibility about which the camp director must concern himself.