

## Camp counselor training, leadership with a purpose

### Situation

Young 4-H members look forward to attending 4-H camp each summer. The camping experience provides youth campers the opportunity to experience an overnight camp, participate in hands-on learning workshops and outdoor activities and work in group settings with their peers.

Teen camp counselors play an important role at 4-H camp being responsible for leading groups of campers and serving as cabin leaders. In Bingham County, teen camp counselors were doing a good job fulfilling their assigned roles, but they were not taking responsibility for leading other activities. The teens seemed to have plenty of energy after hours and at times were challenging for adult camp leaders to manage.

### Our Response

University of Idaho Extension Educators and Bingham County 4-H staff developed a camp counselor training program for prospective teen counselors. The purposes of the counselor training program are to teach counselors: 1) how to lead others; 2) to take charge in front of a group; 3) to plan and carry out a key camp activity; and 4) to work as a team.

The program consists of four training sessions plus an all-day retreat. All returning counselors are interviewed at the first session while the new counselors participate in counselor orientation. The interviews are conducted to help teach teens how to properly conduct themselves in an interview. At the trainings all attendees participate in a leadership activity, name-learning game and practice camp songs. The teens also work in committees with the supervision of an adult advisor to plan and implement the key 4-H camp activities: campfire, flag ceremonies, carnival and dance. The advisor provides “shadow” lead-



A teen counselor helping a camper with project completion.

ership to make sure the teens have the needed support to complete the activity. The youth are responsible for carrying to completion the activity at camp. The youth are required to attend the camp counselor retreat where they participate in team building activities, learn how to recognize and report child abuse and present a report on the readiness of the assigned camp activity.

Two teen camp “Daily Directors” are selected for each of the three days at camp from the experienced counselors – those who have been a counselor for one or more years – to be in charge of one day at camp. These directors are responsible for making sure luggage is loaded and unloaded and ringing the bell at camp signaling time to wake up or to indicate the start and ending of a class or activity to keep the camp on schedule. They lead songs, make announcements and assign the order in which camper groups line up for meals in addition to their assigned group

activities and cabin leadership roles. Adults are at camp as support and teach classes. Adults have a very limited role in discussing camp activities with campers and do not take charge of activities. The camp is driven by the teens. A counselor meeting is held each day in the late afternoon so counselors can share successes and discuss challenges.

### Program Outcomes

The youth are empowered to make sure 4-H camp is successful. They understand they have the responsibility to take care of the youth campers and to help them participate. Returning counselors work hard to be selected as a daily director by attending all the training sessions, participating with a positive attitude and taking the lead on activity teams.

At the conclusion of the 2013 camp, counselors were given a retrospective survey answering questions on "Training to be a Camp Counselor" using a scale of strongly agree, agree, don't know, disagree, or strongly disagree. Results of that survey are shown in the following table.

Question	Before Camp	After Camp
	Strongly Agree - %	
I was able to lead group games.	11	63
I was able to interact and participate with youth.	47	84
I know how to handle youth behavior problems.	11	42
I know how to effectively talk and listen to youth.	32	74
Helped where needed even when it wasn't my responsibility.	16	47
I felt I was responsible.	37	79

Teens were asked to list the skills learned as a counselor. One replied, "I learned how to be responsible for others," while another shared, "I learned listening skills and how to deal with conflict." A daily director wrote, "I learned leadership, dealing with kids and planning events." Another director said, "I learned that I couldn't solve every problem but I could do my best. "When asked, "How do you think you may use the skills learned as a counselor" one shared, "When can't you use leadership or kids skills? I can use them to plan effectively and stay organized."

These responses indicate the teen counselors gained life-skills by working with others and helping young campers in an overnight camping experience.

### The Future

The teen counselors spend many hours preparing for camp and work long days at camp without pay. The effort they put

forth and the skills they learn inspire University of Idaho Extension Educators and Bingham County 4-H staff to continue to provide up-to-date leadership experiences for the teens in preparation for 4-H camp.

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