

• A PLACE TO SHARE •

KATHARINE KISTLER

Dear Summer Camp Counselor:

Let me first say, I am so intensely jealous of you. I think every person who has had the pleasure of working at camp, be it for one year or five, is envious of anyone who gets to be there when they aren't, and for good reason. Summer camp is a magical place. But it's not just the landscape that encourages those who enter camp grounds to be the greatest version of themselves. It's *you* who makes this place magical.

Right now, you may not be feeling super magical. Maybe you're a returning counselor who's scared of not knowing the answer to questions you think you ought to know. Maybe it's your first year as a counselor, and you're scared out of your mind at the crazy cheers, chants, and games already going on. No matter what your situation, any nerves you feel right now are *good*. It means you want to do a good job. Everything you need to know will be laid out for you in your training, and anything that isn't covered will come naturally or will be solved with a simple question and answer once the campers arrive. And I've got some practical tips for maintaining your sanity this summer.

Write good letters (or camper reports, or postcards, or whatever your camp has you do to memorialize your campers in writing). Not only will this give you a stronger bond with your campers' parents, who will remember you in the years to come for paying such close attention to their child, but it will help you get to know your campers better. Each night, write down a couple of things each camper did that day that were unique to them (quotes, their interests, etc.). By the time you sit down to write to parents, you'll have entire letters planned out in your head that will feel organic and will flow onto the page, even for the shyest camper. This will also make your one-on-one bond with each camper a lot stronger.

If you have a quiet camper, keep an eye on them during cabin conversation. If they start to speak and trail off because they feel nervous or think no one's paying attention, ask them what they were saying. Engage them yourself, again and again; before you know it, they'll be leading conversations. All they need is a little more deliberate attention than more outgoing campers.

Be nice to the Counselors-in-Training and take the time to teach them. They aren't going to be perfect at their job, partly because they don't technically *have* a job yet. But they are *so* eager and willing to impress you, so when they slip up, calmly tell them how to do the job correctly and let them know it's OK to try again. Chances are, you aren't perfect at this job either, so don't be too hard on them.

Embrace the weird. Some of the best moments you'll have this summer will happen when you let go of your insecurities and act silly with your campers. Join the dance parties, and encourage your campers to wear their hair in crazy braids and buns. Let them know it's OK to be different. The more open you are about being carefree and being yourself, the more open your campers will be, and the more fun you *and* they will have at summer camp.

Wake up every day and *decide* to be happy. Some days you'll be tired and cranky and just over it, but *really* try to be happy. Put a smile on your face, drink some water (drink a *lot* of water), and choose happiness. Not only will this make the day go by faster, but you may just find that you end up having a good day after all.

This job isn't easy. It is hard and taxing and will drain everything from you if you do it right. But it is so worth it. The people sitting around you are the best people you will ever meet, and camp is the best work environment you will ever be in.

Photo courtesy of Katharine Kistler.



Katharine Kistler, a graduate student at Texas State University, is an alumnus of Kickapoo Kamp for Girls in Kerrville, Texas. In the 13 years she spent at Kickapoo, she was a camper, counselor, and waterfront director.