

A group of diverse children and teenagers are shown from the chest up, looking upwards with expressions of awe and excitement. They are outdoors, with a blurred background of green trees and a building. The children are wearing casual summer clothing like t-shirts and tank tops. The text "TRAINING ALL SUMMER" is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

TRAINING ALL SUMMER

The importance and benefit of ongoing staff training



Photo courtesy of Camp Carl

Staff training often feels like you are trying to fit everything into a box that isn't big enough. Whether your camp devotes one or two weeks to training at the beginning of the summer, it never feels like enough time. Making sure to fit in the hard and soft skills feels daunting for year-round staff members. ►



Photo courtesy of Crowders Ridge

“It is detrimental to the camp and staff to focus so heavily on training at the beginning of summer but not revisit these crucial topics when in the thick of it.” —Megan Bellows, director of Frontier Ranch (Scotts Valley, California)

“Retraining for staff is helpful to reduce injuries.” —Lossing Coxeter, Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company

Many camps continue training throughout the summer to remedy that challenge. “We have seen a great need for it,” noted Megan Bellows, director of Frontier Ranch (Scotts Valley, California). “It is detrimental to the camp and staff to focus so heavily on training at the beginning of summer but not revisit these crucial topics when in the thick of it.”

Summer camps routinely train staff on hard skills before summer camp begins, often relying on outside training companies. Trout Lake Camps (Pine River, Minnesota) sends the leaders of their specialized program areas, like adventure, horsemanship and at-risk youth, to off-site training before camp begins, but it doesn’t end there.

“We also have morning meetings during the summer in each department to refresh those skills,” said James Rock, executive director at Trout. During these meetings, the full-time staff or off-site vendors review best practices to ensure that the skills are still fresh each week of camp.

Laity Lodge Youth Camp (Leakey, Texas) has a similar plan in place. Executive director Cary Hendricks shared, “We have periodic check-ins with high ropes and lifeguards, either led by third-party vendors or full-time staff.” These keep all the staff on the same page and safety at the forefront of their minds.

Not only does the extra training help staff, but it also helps a camp from a risk management point of view. Lossing Coxeter, manager of risk strategy at Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company, shared, “With these best practices in place, we have observed that camps experience fewer injuries and disruptions in activities. Even just a short meeting between sessions can be helpful.” Coxeter explained, “Camps mirror our broader society as well, which has found retraining for staff is helpful to reduce injuries.”

While the crucial training areas include lifeguarding, ropes course and horsemanship, camps are also beginning to focus on retraining other areas such as their camp culture, values, mental wellness and community living. At Mount Hermon (Mount Hermon, California), training occurs throughout the summer, focusing on ensuring that staff know why they are doing what they do. “We retrain on Mount Hermon’s vision and values,” Kelsey Paterson, director of Ponderosa Lodge and the intern program, said. “If our staff miss this, they won’t know the point of anything else.”

At Mount Hermon, this involves meeting with the summer leadership team, counselors and support staff separately each day. “We use these vantage points as training to communicate what the staff need to hear,” explained Paterson. During a camp week, these meetings have to be short, so Paterson chooses the three things that need to be communicated during each meeting. ►

The Mount Hermon team also uses the acronym V.I.B.E. to structure their limited time. “We begin with the **vision**, why we do what we do, then move on to **information** that we need to communicate,” Paterson shared. “After that, we focus on **blessing** the staff and making them feel cared for, and we send them out with **encouragement** as they get to do their job.”

While staff training at Mount Hermon happens before camp, Paterson noted, “We view the first two weeks of camp as additional training. It’s a time for them to live out practically what we discussed during training.” The benefit of this process, she explained, is that the staff create better expectations for the rest of the summer.

Continuous communication with staff is also at the core of Frontier Ranch’s training throughout the summer. Bellows said they have a morning meeting where they study the Bible and cover any announcements for that day. In the middle of the day, they hold a leadership team meeting to ensure everyone is on the same page. Before dinner, “We have a 30-minute counselor meeting where they can be given announcements, additional training, be retrained on something, etc.”

Some camps use summer as a time to increase leadership skills. Katey Astleford, guest services director at Twin Rocks Friends Camp (Rockaway Beach, Oregon), said, “Throughout the summer, we aim to increase the leadership ability of our summer staff. For example, they may shadow a more seasoned year-round staff person on housekeeping to take on the duties of a ‘Cleaning Captain.’” By doing this, Twin Rocks encourages staff to return next summer and move into a position with more responsibility.

Trout Lake Camps takes a different approach to ongoing training. With summer staff that may only

work a few weeks or half a summer, they must cover all aspects of training regularly. “Every Sunday, all summer long, we run a three-hour training session where we condense the two weeks of precamp training for staff who come in throughout the summer. This is also supplemented by our presummer, online training” explained Rock.

Twin Rocks has a similar orientation each week. Astleford shared, “Before each of our kids’ camps, all our counselors undergo a 10- to 12-hour counselor training before each camp begins.” She explained, “Much of this includes what our summer staff have undergone during their presummer training, but they sit in on each session to learn more camp-specific information (e.g., the particulars of working with grade school kids or high schoolers).”

Another focus for Trout throughout the summer is biblical literacy. “We have quadrupled the time we spend teaching the Bible in the last few years,” said Rock. “Staff don’t come with the basic Bible knowledge that it feels like summer staff used to have, so we work harder training that.” To do this, Trout Lake has devised a plan to go through nearly the entire Bible with the staff in their 7th- to 12th-grade staff program. “The more our staff can be prepared for Bible teaching, the better they can relay it to campers,” he said.

Biblical literacy is also a key training area for Mount Hermon. During presummer training, Paterson said they spend time going over the whole story of the Bible and how it points to the gospel. This doesn’t just help staff be better with campers but also helps them in their walk with Jesus. “The staff are followers of Jesus, and I want to invest in them,” she shared. ►



Photo courtesy of Camp Eagle



“Throughout the summer, we aim to increase the leadership ability of our summer staff.” —Katey Astleford, guest services director at Twin Rocks Friends Camp (Rockaway Beach, Oregon)

Laity Lodge uses training time throughout the summer to focus on camper and staff well-being.



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

To revisit that throughout the summer, Paterson continually asks the staff how this summer is leading them closer to Jesus during their meeting times. “We talk about the big story of the Bible and how it communicates identity, values and purpose,” she said. “I want staff to be so immersed in the Bible that it just flows out to the campers.”

Good decision-making is another key training element reviewed during every morning meeting throughout the summer at Trout. “We focus on this as a part of being safe throughout the summer,” explained Rock. “The payoff for us is that we have fewer bad decisions made by staff.”

Training for Trout staff also happens throughout the year. Rock and other year-round staff are creating two podcasts for staff to listen to during the year. They use these to talk about what it is like to work at Trout or to interview past staff. “It’s a fun distraction,” Rock said. “We’re still training them; they just don’t realize it.”

Laity Lodge Youth Camp incorporates year-round training through retreats in the spring. Full-time staff lead a weekend training for leadership staff in the early spring. They use this time to learn how to lead their core areas. After that, the summer leadership staff spend a weekend training the rest of the staff. “This gives them a chance to try on their leadership roles before camp starts,” he explained.

Laity Lodge Youth Camp uses training time throughout the summer to focus on camper and staff well-being. “We look at all we do through the lens of mental well-being,” Hendricks said. “We try to get all staff to do this during staff week

and reiterate it throughout the summer.” They use specific morning meeting times and optional focus groups with the counselors to touch base on these things. “We do a tough issues check,” he said, “to see how things are going with them, [asking questions such as] ‘Is this the job you thought it would be? Do you feel like you belong?’”

Hendricks has seen the benefits of this continued training. “It creates an atmosphere of belonging and inclusion for staff.” He said these touchpoints make a difference “largely so the staff feel supported. Ongoing training shows staff that we care, that they are important and that their jobs are important.”

Not only does continued training help staff feel valued, but it also helps them keep focused on the vision and values of camp. Paterson explained, “It’s a reminder that we’re part of something bigger than what we see daily. Vision has to be repeated. When they are sick of hearing it, and I am sick of saying it, that’s when it begins to stick.”

Whether biblical literacy, community values, hard skills or mental wellness, training throughout the summer benefits the staff and leads to a better camper experience. It is also a way to stop issues before they begin. “The better we can be at training upstream and creating a good environment instead of working downstream and reacting after problems have occurred,” Hendricks said, “the less risk we have.” ■

“We have quadrupled the time we spend teaching the Bible in the last few years.” —James Rock, executive director of Trout Lake Camps (Pine River, Minnesota)



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