

MEN ARE MISSING

Addressing the challenge of finding and hiring quality guys for camp staff



Is your summer camp staff comprised of 60 percent women and 40 percent men? Is it the same for your camper programs? Do you have a hard time finding enough quality men to serve in camp?



Photo courtesy of Lake Ann Camp

You would think that camp would be highly attractive to guys — a place of activity, adventure, challenge, camaraderie and craziness. But it's not. This got me wondering: What's happening to boys that makes camp less appealing? ▶

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What's happening: The Demise of Guys

Philip Zimbardo and Nikita Coulombe coined the phrase “The Demise of Guys: Why boys are struggling and what we can do about it” in their widely popular TED Talk. They, along with a long list of other researchers, are trying to discern why guys are falling behind in almost every area of life in our society. Girls outperform boys at every level of education from elementary school to graduate school. Boys are four to five times more likely than girls to be labeled with some form of hyperactivity disorder and represent two-thirds of students in remedial education programs. At the college level, men only account for about 40 percent of graduates. Female students make up between 55 to 60 percent of the populations at most Christian colleges across our country. This attendance ratio is similar in the church. In the book *Why Men Hate Church*, author David Murrow states that less than 40 percent of the adults in most churches are men, and 20 to 25 percent of married, churchgoing women attend without their husbands.

Additionally, men in our society are more likely to commit suicide, be overweight and continue to live with their parents into their 20s. Most researchers note an increase in lack of purpose, loss of social skills, a decline of initiative and signs of delayed adulthood in our emerging adult men. Why is it that over 90 percent of prisoners in the U.S. and 100 percent of the mass murderers (school, concert, nightclub, restaurant, mall shootings, etc. in recent years) are all men?



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

Why is this happening?

Over the past six months, as I have reviewed an unending amount of articles, books, blogs and talks, some common explanations have surfaced. First, the media (movies, television and advertising) often portray men as mindless buffoons, while women are attractive, focused and mature. In the news, men are often portrayed as the cause of most social problems, with a long history of aggression and domination. This message has been reinforced in the many reports of high profile sexual abuse cases in the past year. Though much of this history is correct and must be addressed, the overwhelming message that men are receiving today is that being a man is bad and that masculinity is evil. Our society is not giving us a clear picture of what it means to be a healthy, whole, responsible man.

Second, the explosion of the internet and video game industry has created a safe and easy place for boys and young men to withdraw — being together but alone. In study after study, video game use and pornography are consuming an increasing amount of young men's time. Additionally, gaming accounts for approximately 15 percent of the waking hours in the average guy's week. Both of these artificial worlds are becoming more real than real life.

Thirdly, research has shown a significant decrease in testosterone in men over the past several decades. These changes are attributed to chemicals found in plastics, food, pharmaceuticals and detergents that “interfere with the body's endocrine system and have detrimental immune, reproductive, developmental and neurological effects in all animals, including humans,” Zimbardo shares in his book *Man Interrupted*. The chemicals laced throughout our society seem to be changing the biology of men in ways still not fully understood.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the increase of fatherlessness is correlated to almost every social ill (anti-social behavior, suicide, unemployment, school dropout rate, divorce, premarital sex, etc.) we see in our culture today. Depending on the study you read, it is estimated that between 25 to 40 percent of children are growing up without the active presence of a father in their lives (see my *InSite* article in January 2017). The virtual absence of multi-generational living, regular family dinners and extended personal interaction with adult males give boys and young men few pictures of what a healthy, whole male looks like. The prevalence of divorce, both inside and outside the church, also contributes to the erosion of trust in fathers and men. A father's voice and example are two of the most powerful (if not *the* most powerful) influencers in a child's life and development. When this influence is negative or absent, that child has a significant deficit. Surrogate role models can help, but dads make all the difference and their absence is catastrophic. As the family collapses, so does the character, maturity and health of emerging generations of men. ►



Photo courtesy of Lake Ann Camp



What can camps do about this?

There are many ways that camps and the church can help with this problem in today's world. As we look toward finding and hiring quality young men for our camps, we first must look at how we lead the men already on our staff (especially since retaining staff is typically easier than recruiting). Here are a few ways that HoneyRock and other camps across the country feed into and develop the guys on their staff:

- **Provide experiences that test and grow.** Guys need difficult experiences that test their character, their faith and their understanding of the world and reality. The outdoor environment of Christian camping has an endless amount of challenging opportunities available to us. Extended wilderness trips, countless hours of service and challenging activities can push young men to their limits.
- **Designate a tech-free zone.** Help guys learn (remember) what it's like to have fun without a screen. By limiting access to technology, you create space for them to listen to God, develop authentic relationships and detox from technology addiction. At HoneyRock, we have a two- to four-week fast at the beginning of the season, and a policy that phones stay in people's room and are only used after that in a designated area during off time. We need to put in place a plan to help them with the detox process — giving them fun activities and group development options.

- **Focus on kingdom benefits.** Greg Anderson, president of Inspiration Point (Clitherall, Minnesota), says it's important to remind guys that they are working for more than a paycheck. "Make sure they know how they are making an impact — both on the staff and in the kingdom."
- **Drop the stereotypes.** Not all guys are jocks or comfortable in an up-front role. CRISTA Camps (Washington) has seen that a lot of their male team members have an interest in the arts. According to CRISTA's camp director, Shane Carlson, they've been engaging more guys in video production and editing.

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Recruiting guys to come to camp

This “demise of guys” has a significant impact on camps’ ability to recruit men to join their staff, but it’s not a hopeless situation. Here are a few approaches HoneyRock and other camps across the country have found success with:

- **Boys need to be nudged.** Unlike girls, who tend to choose camp on their own, guys typically need to be told to go. We need to engage other people in helping guys come to camp. This includes recruiting them in packs or finding influential people in their lives that can nudge them to come. Just asking a guy to come work at camp doesn’t usually work, but if they’re inspired or challenged by a valued leader in their life, it’s more likely they’ll choose camp. At HoneyRock, we use dorm parents, coaches or influential college professors to encourage guys to be engaged.

- **Recruit locally.** At Inspiration Point, Anderson says they attend athletic events, concerts, arts events, church youth groups and other gatherings where guys are present. They begin to build relationships and become “part of their lives well in advance of their potential time on summer staff.” Anderson notes that when you invite those guys to apply, “they’re much more apt to join you.”
- **Start young.** It’s never too early to begin planting the seeds with young campers. At Deerfoot Lodge (New York and North Carolina), Executive Director, Chief Ron Mackey sets up their program so their leaders are seen as heroes and an example of what a godly man looks like. “Retention is critical to our mission, and a benefit is that campers grow up with the goal of becoming staff,” Mackey says. “As a result, 85 to 95 percent of our staff come with prior Deerfoot experience.” We implement the same approach at HoneyRock.
- **Expand job descriptions.** Consider job postings that aren’t limited to one role at camp. Chief Nick Dotti, summer camp director at Deerfoot Lodge, says he can teach any skill to a guy who loves Jesus and “has a passion for building, coaching and mentoring boys.” During a summer at Deerfoot, a guy on staff might rotate through roles each session, serving as a counselor for one, on the maintenance team for another and as an instructor in all of Deerfoot’s 11 instructional areas throughout the rest of the season.



There is so much more to this topic that needs to be explored. I hope this article gets you thinking and encourages a new level of conversation at your camp. We’ll engage this topic in more depth at the national conference in December. I hope to see you there. ■



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