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Rituals At Camp

The perfect end to a hectic, action-packed day

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Photos: by Camp Wekeela

Take a moment and think about your nightly routine in falling asleep. Depending on your age, the answer may be very different from that of other camp professionals. With the abundance of smartphones and TVs so accessible in bedrooms, many people may fall asleep with a screen right in their face, blue light emitting and disrupting their R.E.M. sleep cycle. How often do you spend a few minutes before bed being away from a screen, maybe reading a book, speaking with a loved one, meditating, or practicing gratitude? This article is not going to preach about mindfulness nor is it a how-to of nightly routines, but it will stress the importance of them in camp settings. One of the unique traditions at Camp Wekeela in Hartford, Maine, is known simply as Rituals. The feeling and importance of Rituals is challenging to explain; you need to be there to experience it. Simply put, Rituals is a method for campers and staff members who reside in a bunk/cabin—their camp family—to put closure on the busy, sometimes hectic, days of camp. Rituals are consistently a highlight of the experience and one of the most important functioning elements of a bunk dynamic/culture—an actual ritual. Like in most summer camps, these Rituals are electronics-free. The list below explores how camp directors can incorporate these nightly Rituals, describe the importance of them for camper morale, and provide some examples that can work in any camp setting.

What Are Rituals?

Recognizing that a *day* may be different in residential/overnight camps vs. day camps, this exercise is designed to put closure on a day, no matter what time. This activity usually begins with campers and counselors seated in a circle. The activity uses one, or a combination, of the following: Recognizing that a *day* may be different in residential/overnight camps vs. day camps, this exercise is designed to put closure on a day, no matter what time. This activity usually begins with campers and counselors seated in a circle. The activity uses one, or a combination, of the following:

- Emotional connections
- Storytelling
- Anecdote sharing
- Unlimited discussion topics.

Bunk mates ensure that everyone contributes to the conversation, which is a special part of the day. Rituals can be reflective, goofy, calming, serious, or anywhere between.

Many of the most powerful Rituals use mindfulness techniques to help campers ease their minds. Most camp directors know that each day is incredibly busy. Campers and staff members are constantly entertained and experience wonderful memories. Putting closure on the day offers campers an opportunity to decompress, relax, and ease into a deeper sleep.

It's important that no staff members have free time or rush through this process. Rituals can take a few minutes or an hour—doing them is the important part. Separating each nightly Ritual into categories is important; this is where some of the most authentic memories are made in bunk bonding. Common Rituals are:

▫Calming: staff-led meditation/stretching
▫Gratitude: thanking a Brother/Sister (sharing anonymous gratitude with another person in the bunk)
▫Serious: Rock & Rose (more on this below)
▫Reflective: noting the high point of the day/week
▫Goal-oriented: questions/reflections on goals set for camp
▫Narrative: a counselor telling a story to the group, or each person telling a story as part of a theme
▫Silly/goofy: *MadLibs*, Would-you-rather inquiries, or fun questions
▫Questions: beginning a discussion with questions is impactful. They can be silly or random or more serious and reflective (i.e., What is your spirit animal and why? If you could live in any timeframe, what would it be? Who is your role model? Who is your camp role model? Who is your hero?).

Incorporating Rituals

Putting Rituals into practice can be done quickly or incrementally. First, assess the programming structure with questions:

▫What does my evening program look like?
▫When do staff members have free time?
▫How do staff members say goodnight to campers?
▫What are campers' bedtimes?
▫What are staff members' curfews?

As a residential, overnight camp, our evening program looks like this:

▫Dinner
▫Evening activity
▫Camper groups returning to bunks
▫Getting ready for bed (brush teeth, change, shower, etc.)
▫Rituals
▫Lights out
▫Staff free time.

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Incorporating Rituals

Campers should be ready for bed by the time Rituals occur. The nightly routine should put closure on the day, and then campers can drift off to sleep.

Good staff members make Rituals meaningful. When members rush through to have their own off-time, campers can see it. On the other hand, some of our best staff members over the years have taken Rituals seriously, using them as a tool for bunk bonding. The most common question asked of former campers when they desire to become a staff member is "What Rituals that your staff members arranged for you would you like to pass down to your own campers?"

Sincere Vs. Goofy

Not all Rituals should be serious, nor should they all be goofy. There must be a balance. Sincere practices are usually better with older campers, but young campers can participate if strong expectations are set. Some great sincere Rituals are "Rock & Rose" and "Thank a Brother/Sister." In these exercises, campers practice gratitude for their bunkmates and take a larger look at their own selves. For example, in "Rock & Rose," campers are asked to think about their lives in order to decide the following:

- What is a rock (i.e., something that grounds them)?
- What is a rose (i.e., something that makes them stand out or be exceptional)?

It can be inspiring and powerful to watch young people explore ideas about themselves and open up.

Rituals Music

After each cabin finishes its Rituals, most will usually play music, as campers either lie in their beds or sit in a circle. This moment invokes feelings of reflection, gratitude, and togetherness. Counselors will determine if the "nightly song" will change or be repeated each night. Some of the older bunks may have a song they have listened to for many years that has a profound meaning for the group. If campers are asked during the school year what it's like to hear the bunk's Ritual song, they will likely say they feel like they've been transported back to their cabin for a moment. Music is one of the most powerful, creative expressions in the world, and the power of music at camp is no different. It is an incredible tool for bonding and group identity.

The most important element of Rituals is to put closure on the day and to help campers feel refreshed for the next day of camp!

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