

# Hey parents, camp's over. NOW WHAT?



KEVIN N. CARSON AND CRAIG KONDRACKI

**S**ummer camp. Some of my greatest spiritual decisions and lifelong friends were made at camp. Perhaps you never had the opportunity to experience the fun, excitement and spiritual challenge of a church summer camp. The goal of camp is to take young people to a setting where they can be with other Christian youth, sit under the Word, learn from youth counselors and participate in fun activities — all to encourage decisions regarding Christ and life. The challenge, though, is making those decisions stick after the young people return home. And parents play a crucial role in making that happen. None of us wants to blow it, so here are some helps for encouraging your child once he or she gets back home.

## Growth is a Process

Just as physical growth takes your child 31,536,000 seconds each

year between birthdays, spiritually your child's growth takes time as well. It would be so convenient if God would send them to us already mature; however, His plan does not include instant growth. Parenting is more like a marathon than a sprint, more like an oven than a microwave, more a process than an event. Everything does not have to be accomplished today in your child's life. Your focus can be on the big picture.

Inevitably, a person is going to go in the direction his or her feet are pointing. When your child returns from camp, which way is he facing? What is she passionate about? Where is his excitement? Does she desire to honor God daily? Does he want to spend time with godly friends? Does he want to hang out with church leadership? Is she considering how to please God in a vocational choice? Which way is he heading? If he continues in the direction he is pointing, where does the road lead? As the parent, your goal is to keep your child pointing in a Godward direction.

Remember when your child was learning to walk. Initially, it was difficult to stand even with you holding his hands. Over time though, he began to pull himself up on anything that would hold him. Then in moments of sheer joy to you as a parent (and of great concern), your child slowly started to get a balance without grasping the nearest object. After a while, balance came more naturally and with your encouragement came the first step. Then two. Then three. Now, you can hardly keep up. One step at a time, your child went from clumsy waddling to running. So it is with spiritual growth. Your child will grow into Christ-likeness one step at a time. Be patient with the process.

## Parental Self-Counsel

By self-counsel, I mean the examination of your own heart (i.e., thoughts, motives, desires) and behavior by allowing the light of God's Word to expose every part of your life (Colossians 3:16). Many times we unintentionally fail to model what we want for our children. We all want to see our children grow in Christ-likeness (Romans 8:29; Colossians 3:10) and become a young man or young lady who pleases God. When we as parents are not evaluating our own lives in relationship to God's Word, we drift away, just as a boat on a stream, from Christ-likeness, not toward it (Hebrews 3:12–13). Growing in Christ is hard work and intentional.

There are several areas for careful self-counsel. First, in broadest terms, do you, dad or mom, glorify God? Paul writes, "Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Everything we do in life, down to the smallest details, either does or does not bring God glory. So as we interact with one another in the home, with neighbors, with supervisors at work, with family and friends, our interaction either pleases and honors God or it doesn't. That is why Paul's words are so powerful when he writes, "Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you" (Philippians 4:9). As a parent, God holds you accountable as the model. If your

child is going to learn, there must be a godly teacher. If your child is going to receive, there must be a godly giver. If your child is going to hear, there must be a godly speaker. If your child is going to see, there must be a godly example. The reality is, your child catches much more than what you will ever intentionally teach.

Another area of parental self-counsel relates to your priorities as parents. Those priorities are functionally transferred to the child. Formally you may teach your child the importance of God, the priority of the church, and the significance of having a relationship with Christ, but in day-to-day living you may teach radically different priorities. Does God enter in your average conversation around the home other than on Sundays? Do you typically arrange your life around the activities and stated priorities of your local church? Does Christ come first in your typical day — your schedule, finances, conversations, friendships, among others?

There is still an additional area for a parent to consider when helping camp decisions become permanent changes. What is your attitude toward the church? What does your child hear you talk about on your way home from church? How do you usually address issues pertaining to the pastor or youth pastor in front of your child? Again, you are looking for inconsistencies in your self-counsel here. Do you formally want your child to be mentored by the leadership of the church, yet in your daily talk about the leadership you encourage disrespect toward them? If you do not honor God by respecting the leaders in the church, why would you ever expect your child to do so?

### What To Do

Encourage your child (in a positive way) to stay committed even in difficult situations. Try being less directive and confrontational and instead ask questions to help him or her discover where there has been some slacking off. This type of encouragement can help hold them accountable to the decision they made at camp.

Make sure you praise your child when he makes good on a particular commitment. Look for those success-

es and be sure to give praise to God for his grace that enables growth in Christ (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Point your child to Christ for the necessary strength to succeed and stay committed rather than pointing him to self or others. Avoid asking the child what others will think if he goes back on his commitment, comparing his progress with others, or pointing to specific individuals as the primary example instead of Christ and the Word. It is the Holy Spirit through God's Word that provides the strength to endure. Therefore, we want to keep the child's focus on Christ through His Word.

Think of ways your child can put the camp commitment into action. Look for places where your child can do loving deeds for others and serve those around him. It is vitally important for the child to see all acts of kindness and loving deeds as part of a ministry to others — whether the other person is a neighbor or a fellow church member.

### What Not To Do

Don't dwell on defeats. When your child fails (which is going to happen), be ready to encourage the appropriate response. It is discouraging enough for your child already without the parent piling on additional burdens. You want to see confession and forgiveness of sin when your child does not stick with his or her commitment.

When you remind your child of the commitment or decision made at camp, be positive. Sometimes parents can hold a decision made for Christ over the child's head until eventually the child resents choosing to follow Christ. Instead, you want to hold your child accountable lovingly and gently (Ephesians 4:15).

You especially do not want to doubt your child's sincerity. Paul reminds us that true love hopes all things (1 Corinthians 13:4–7). Even if the child has made commitments before and broken them, you do not want to minimize the current decision. Instead, the goal is to see this as part of God's steadfast effort to grow your child.

Also, be careful not to dampen the child's zeal or excitement. It is so easy to let our own failures and struggles influence our words to a child rather

than depending upon God's grace to continue to grow this individual.

### Encouraging your child's growth

Evaluate your family schedule so there is time for regular church attendance, time to serve others, and time to spend with the pastor, youth pastor and others. As children get older, it is easy to let them be more committed to school, sports or work than to the church. As the parent, it is your responsibility to help order your child's life according to appropriate priorities. Remember to consider which way your child's feet are pointing.

Buy good books and other kinds of reading material that will encourage your child's camp decisions. If you do not know what resources are best, ask your pastor, youth pastor or other leader to provide you with a good list of age-appropriate resources.

Seek the help of your pastor, youth pastor or church leader for other ideas. Make sure they know you expect teamwork for growth. We all want to help maintain camp momentum. Invite them over to spend time with your family. Go on your child's favorite activity and invite church leaders along for fellowship. Be sure the church leadership understands that interaction is welcomed in your home.

### Be Encouraged Along the Way

God's plan is that you and your child will grow in Christ-likeness over the next few months. Will you be perfect? No, but God knows that already. Will your child be perfect? No, but God knows that too. His plan is that you would embrace the spiritual decisions and commitments your child made at camp and use them as an opportunity for the entire family to grow in Christ. What a great excuse for us as parents to improve in areas or change in areas where it is needed in order to honor Christ.

**Kevin N. Carson** - Pastor of Sunrise Baptist Church, Ozark, Missouri, and Chair of Biblical Counseling at Baptist Bible Graduate School of Theology

**Craig Kondracki** - Youth Pastor of Sunrise Baptist Church, Ozark, Missouri.