

Praise for Happy Campers

“HAPPY CAMPERS shines a light on nine positive practices used in quality summer camps and offers readers dozens (and dozens!) of ways to use these strategies to help kids and families thrive year-round...I highly recommend it for *anyone* living or working with young people!”

—Signe Whitson, author and international educator

“Concrete simple strategies to help kids become well-adjusted adults who continue strong relationships with their parents.”

—Catherine Pearlman, PhD, LCSW, and author of *Ignore It!: How Selectively Looking the Other Way Can Decrease Behavioral Problems and Increase Parenting Satisfaction*

“I’ve been a parenting and happiness expert for more than fifteen years, and I can honestly say that HAPPY CAMPERS is one of the best distillations and applications of research-backed practices for parenting happy, self-motivated, kind, and resilient kids I’ve seen yet.”

—Christine Carter, PhD, author of *Raising Happiness* and *The Sweet Spot*

“[HAPPY CAMPERS] will help parents understand that the magic of the immense growth many kids experience at camp is not simply magic but a set of practices and approaches explained in clear and pragmatic frameworks throughout this book.”

—Devorah Heitner, author of *Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive and Survive in Their Digital World*

“Monke... translates the simple joys of childhood into great parenting and happy families. A great book for remembering the fun of being a kid—and carrying that fun forward into your family life!”

—Karen Lock Kolp, MEd, child development expert, parent coach, and podcaster at weturnedoutokay.com

“You know you want your kids to be resilient problem-solvers, kind and thoughtful, willing to try new things, and able to make the most of opportunities. But how do you help them get there? Audrey Monke’s HAPPY CAMPERS offers practical strategies parents can start putting into effect today that will help kids learn to thrive tomorrow and beyond.” —K. J. Dell’Antonia, author of *How to Be a Happier Parent*

“I’ve long wished life could be like summer camp. In this readable and practical book, Audrey Monke shows how to bring a little bit of that camp magic home to your family.”

—Laura Vanderkam, author of *Off the Clock*
and *Juliet’s School of Possibilities*

“This book is such a compelling invitation to be more intentional, and in such a fun way, to support the friendships and self-esteem of our kids when they need it most.”

—Shasta Nelson, author of *Frientimacy: How to Deepen Friendships for Lifelong Health and Happiness*

“Inspiring and irresistibly practical! HAPPY CAMPERS is a post-millennial parenting treasure—brimming with dozens of essential, achievable, and transformative parenting strategies . . . that will guide your family to great joy and fun together.”

—Tom Rosenberg, president and CEO of the
American Camp Association

“A remarkably powerful parenting guide . . . Audrey has worked with thousands of kids and their parents. She has seen what produces capable and content kids—and what produces the opposite. In HAPPY CAMPERS, she shares a wealth of knowledge and truly practical advice. The unexpected benefit is that her advice actually makes being a parent more enjoyable as well as more effective!”

—Steve Baskin, owner/director of Camp Champions,
Psychology Today writer, and TEDx speaker

“Children are transformed by camp, and parents can learn so much from Audrey’s thoughtful counsel on how to translate camp to home—how to encourage positive transformation all year-round. HAPPY CAMPERS is a must read.” —Harriet Lowe, editor in chief of *Camping Magazine*

Happy Campers



9 Summer Camp Secrets
for Raising Kids Who
Become Thriving Adults

Audrey Monke

Foreword by Tina Payne Bryson, PhD



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STREET

New York Nashville

In order to protect their privacy, names and identifying characteristics of some campers and parents have been changed.

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Center Street
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
centerstreet.com
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First edition: May 2019

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Monke, Audrey, author.

Title: Happy Campers : 9 Summer Camp Secrets for Raising Kids Who Become Thriving Adults / Audrey Monke ; Foreword by Tina Payne Bryson, PhD.

Description: First edition. | New York : Center Street, [2019] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018053043 | ISBN 9781546081791 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781546081784 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Camps—Psychological aspects. | Child rearing. | Child psychology. | Parent and child.

Classification: LCC GV192 .M66 2019 | DDC 796.54/2—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018053043>

ISBN: 978-1-5460-8179-1 (hardcover), 978-1-5460-8178-4 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

LSC-C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Gretchen, Meredith, Charlotte, John, and Owen,
my favorite happy campers.*

Camp Secret #1

Connection Comes First

There is no doubt in my mind that I am the person I am today because of camp. The lessons I have learned at camp about being optimistic, positive, friendly, and outgoing have helped me through many hard times and have helped me to achieve successes that I never thought possible. I learned that with everything I do, “it’s about the process, not the end result.” That lesson I have applied to my life and every experience I am in. Leaving camp this summer, it was very hard to close this chapter of my life and experience the transformation from child and camper to adult, but as I look back I honestly know that camp was the highlight of my childhood and a major part of my life. I cannot thank you enough for eight amazing summers filled with pure happiness and for creating a second home for me where I can truly be myself.

—Stevie

Some of the most touching testimonials I’ve received about camp include the words *home* or *family*. Many campers think of their few weeks at camp as their annual time to get back in touch with themselves and their close friends. As young adults, they are often drawn back to camp to serve as counselors because of their desire to pass along these values to the next generation. When adults reminisce about their camp days, they often say things like, “I met my best friend at camp; we’re still friends thirty years later.” The relationships and connections campers experience are not just a small part of the

program we offer, but the basis for the entire experience; the story about camp is a story about connections. If our campers don't feel accepted, included, and valued, nothing else we teach or do at camp matters. We could have the snazziest cabins, the most delicious food, and the coolest zip lines and Jet Skis, but if we aren't helping kids form connections, we aren't doing what matters most.

I believe the exact same thing is true in our families. Creating a close and connected family culture that promotes positive, lifelong relationships is the most important thing we can do for our children. Warm and supportive parent-child relationships, a sense of being loved, and help and support from family members serve as protective factors and increase children's resilience and their ability to face many of life's inevitable challenges.¹ This doesn't happen just because you live under the same roof, and it doesn't happen by filling your home with cool stuff or your calendar with lavish vacations. Just like at camp, connections are the result of intentionally chosen, day-to-day family habits that create feelings of warmth and belonging.

Social Connections Predict Happiness and Success

Very little that is positive is solitary. When was the last time you laughed uproariously? The last time you felt indescribable joy? The last time you sensed profound meaning and purpose? The last time you felt enormously proud of an accomplishment? Even without knowing the particulars of these high points of your life, I know their form: all of them took place around other people.

—Martin Seligman, Flourish²

To understand why it's important to take connections so seriously, we need look no further than the multiple studies, including the landmark eighty-year Harvard Men's Study, that have shown how social connections are the greatest predictor of all aspects of lifelong success,

including health, academics, and career.³ This study, along with much recent research in the field of positive psychology, has provided countless examples of why our social connections are so important.

One such researcher and a founder of the positive psychology movement, Martin Seligman, wrote the book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. In it he explores PERMA, the acronym he uses to define his theory and five measurable elements that lead to well-being. According to Seligman, in addition to positive emotion (P), engagement (E), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A), a key element of well-being is positive relationships (R). When I first read *Flourish*, I kept having “ah-ha” moments. Finally—I’d found the science behind why kids flourish at camp, which led me to how this science could be applied for kids who will flourish at home. Below I explore PERMA as a framework to show you how.

P: Positive Emotion

Positive emotion is exactly what it sounds like: feeling happy and having positive thoughts about yourself, the people around you, or your surroundings. At camp, positive emotions are the norm, not the exception. We’re singing; we’re dancing; we’re doing skits that don’t make sense but that cause us to laugh so hard our stomachs hurt. Whether we’re telling jokes and stories around the campfire or just entertaining ourselves by talking and hanging out together, positive emotion is literally swirling around camp.

Creating positive emotions at home requires that we make sure to do activities that elicit positive feelings. Anything we can do with our families that makes us laugh, smile, or feel good increases the positive emotion in each of us as individuals. A few years ago, when I was deeply sucked into Pinterest, during nightly sessions of pinning I started a board called “Funny.” While most of the things I put on

there were not funny to my kids, what was funny to them was watching me laugh so hard until I cried. Whatever we can do to bring some laughter and fun to our homes, the better we all feel.

E: Engagement

Seligman describes engagement as being interested in and connected to what you are doing. When you're engaged in your hobby or book or job, you're fired up about learning something new and energized by the activity. At camp, kids are constantly exposed to new experiences and challenges—both recreational and social—that get them interested and excited to learn. They're pushed to get outside their comfort zones and really engage. For some kids, their stay at camp is the first time they've slept away from home and their parents, and they are engaged in learning to live with a group of new people. For others, the camp dance is the first time they've ever danced with other kids, so they're being engaged socially in new ways.

With our families at home, one way to increase engagement is to try a new activity or visit a new place together. Perhaps there's a craft you make as a family, or everyone could go for a hike or a bike ride. Each time we expose our kids to something new that they haven't done before, we present them with the opportunity to engage with something potentially fascinating to them. This can lead to their continued interest in trying new things and finding the engagement that makes them excited to wake up in the morning.

R: Relationships

As Seligman and other researchers found, and most of us intuitively know, “other people are the best antidote to the *downs* of life and the single most reliable *up*.” We all know that positive relationships are

one of the main contributors to our happiness in life, so it's no surprise that relationships are an important pillar of Seligman's theory of what it takes to achieve well-being. Our life's relationships—with our parents, our siblings, our friends, our spouses, and our coworkers—are key to our happiness. At camp, everyone comes to see their old friends, make new friends, and just spend quality time connecting with others and building positive relationships. These relationships at camp are positive, grow strong quickly, and help kids flourish because they do not come with all the competition and baggage that kids have in some of their relationships elsewhere: Two bright students who are close friends are also competing for the valedictorian spot. Or, two athletes who have grown up together are competing for the same position on a soccer team, and so on. The stress that's part of relationships in the real world may challenge our kids' ability to connect.

That's why our family relationships are so important. For our kids, family relationships are their first opportunity to experience the positive connections that teach them how to learn and relate to others, even amidst challenge. The love and caring they experience from parents and older siblings teach kids skills they will use their entire lives in friendships and romantic relationships. At home is where our kids first experience the positive relationships that are key to their well-being.

M: Meaning

To flourish in life, we need to feel that there is meaning to our existence, that we matter and have value in this world. According to Seligman, meaning comes from “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self.” Being a member of a cabin group at camp helps kids gain an understanding of how they are valued by others. For some kids, camp is the first place where they understand what it means to be a valued and an accepted member of an outside community. Unlike at school, where some kids can feel

invisible and go through a day without connecting with others, camp forces integration. Through the experience of being an integral part of their cabin group, kids discover their character strengths through recognition from peers and counselors.

While at camp, kids also have the opportunity to feel part of something bigger than themselves—a camp community that goes back nearly a century, where we still get to follow the same traditions our predecessors did. While learning about friendship, gratitude, and kindness, and practicing those skills, kids learn that they can positively impact others. They learn that they have purpose and that there is meaning in life.

At home, we can help our kids find meaning in their roles in our family by making sure they know they are a necessary and important part of making our household and family function well. Something as simple as asking them to help cook dinner or clean up afterward presents the opportunity for kids to increase their feeling of connection and meaning in the family.

A: Achievement

People flourish when pursuing goals and challenging themselves toward the mastery of a skill. While having a one-time achievement is wonderful, much of the benefit comes from the good feelings we get while striving toward the achievement. Many people report that it was a lot of fun working their way up and accomplishing small steps on the way to a goal. In fact, many people feel disappointed once a goal has been achieved and realize the truth in the saying, “Life is a journey, not a destination.” My husband, an accomplished runner and triathlete, has often shared about his postrace blues. After all the hours of training and working toward a specific time or milestone in a race, once the race is over he has a feeling of being let down, *even* after achieving his desired goal. Working toward the goal is what he enjoys most, so he signs up for another event!

Every day at camp, kids have the opportunity to try new things, master new skills, and both give to and receive encouragement from others who are there to do the same. Some kids arrive at camp with a specific goal: a bull's-eye at archery or getting up on a slalom water ski. But others simply practice and work toward improving or challenge themselves to try something that frightens them—like completing the ropes course. And all of their progress and achievements made in the supportive company of friends add to kids' flourishing at camp.

At home, we can encourage our kids to set goals by modeling that we, too, are setting and reaching goals. My pursuit of a master's degree, and the hours of reading, research, and study, showed my kids firsthand what it looks like to set and work toward a goal. Our kids learn much more from how they see us living than anything we tell them to do. If we want our kids to set and reach big goals, we need to demonstrate how that's done and show them how we encourage other family members to dream big.

Speaking of goals and how connection fuels a successful life, we now look to Harvard researcher Shawn Achor's book *The Happiness Advantage*. In it he describes his study of 1,600 undergraduates that determined "social support [is] a far greater predictor of happiness than any other factor, more than GPA, family income, SAT scores, age, gender, or race." Further, for those who remain unconvinced that happiness is a valid goal, Achor relays the finding that "the happier you are, the more advantages you accrue in nearly every domain of life."⁴ For our kids, feeling connected—and the associated appreciation and belonging—is vital to their well-being and their future success. The research therefore validates putting as much—if not more—effort into having kids who feel connected and have close relationships with other people than having kids who excel at academics or athletics. Which college our kid goes to is less likely to determine their eventual "success" than the quality of their relationships.

REALationships

Quality of relationships is so important. There is one concept counselors at Gold Arrow focus on throughout each summer. The concept is reinforced with a word we created: *REALationship*. In order to help our campers distinguish between the many “friends”—online and in person—they have already encountered, instead of “relationship” we say, “realationship,” with emphasis on the *real*. Many of our campers come to us from lives drenched in social media and face competitive pressure academically, in sports, and sometimes between siblings in their own family. Some children believe, whether accurately or not, that their parents’ and others’ love and acceptance of them is based on their appearance or individual achievements. The most important thing their time at camp can do is fuel their spirit with strong friendships and acceptance for who they are.

Just like our counselors’ most important priority is to form positive, close relationships with each of their campers, parents, too, need to prioritize forming REALationships with each child. This close connection is more important than any other aspect of parenting. Forming a positive, nurturing relationship with your child will help ensure your child’s future success and happiness in all areas of life.

A (Acceptance) + B (Belonging) = C (Connection)

Forming close connections with children can be remembered using the acronym “ABC”: Acceptance + Belonging = Connection. The most basic element of any REALationship is spending time getting to know each other. At my camp, starting with their very first interaction and continuing throughout the camp session, we strive to go beyond simply learning our campers’ names and surface information about their family, like where they’re from, and what hobbies and

sports they like. The goal, once a comfort level has been achieved, is to learn about each camper's inner strengths and what makes them tick. Camp counselors learn these deeper character traits through asking a lot of questions, listening well to their answers, modeling and encouraging vulnerability, and expressing sincere interest in each camper.

Parents, too, can practice these same techniques at home—asking questions, listening well, and sharing personal stories—to form closer bonds with children. While it may feel awkward at first, you can start a family habit of having conversations similar to the ones camp counselors lead. More ideas for conversation-starting questions you can ask your kids are in this chapter's "Around the Campfire" activity and in "Questions for Connection" in the "Resources" section at the end of this book.

At Yosemite Sierra, counselors build close connections with campers with a nightly "tuck-in." Whether the camper is eight or seventeen, starting on the first night of camp and continuing throughout the two-week session, the counselor comes over to each camper's bunk, shares a kindness or an affirmation with them, checks on how they're doing, and wishes them a good sleep. On the first night, added messages include, "I'm so glad you're in my group. I've been waiting for you," as well as comments about any information counselors were made aware of ahead of time. While it may feel strange on the first day of camp when they've just met, campers quickly come to expect their nightly tuck-in. They also quickly come to love the nurturing from their counselor. Kids of every age enjoy this kind of nightly connection with parents at home.

My daughter, at age eleven, returned from a sleepover at a friend's house and told me she was surprised that her friend's mother didn't come to say good night to them or tuck her friend in. It was my daughter's first experience of not having an adult say good night, as she had become accustomed to the practice of a nighttime connection both at home and at camp. No matter their age, kids enjoy being

tucked in, whether that means an actual bedside chat or a simple hug good night. Often, when our kids most need those nightly chats (pre-adolescence and the teen years), that's when parents start to believe they are too old to be tucked in and stop the regular nighttime visits. For as long as possible, stop by your kid's room, give them a quick back rub or hug, and see if they have anything to share. Many important conversations and sharing happen in the comfort of a dark room right before sleep.

In our busy family lives, we can easily fall into unhealthy patterns that ignore some of our own and our children's basic needs to be seen, heard, and loved. By focusing on connecting daily, you can help your child feel the acceptance (A) and belonging (B) they need in order to feel the connection (C) that is vital to their well-being. This formula produces close friendships in just two weeks of camp, friendships that campers say are the closest relationships they've ever experienced. Parents, too, can create these same feelings at home.

A (Acceptance): "Be You"

Campers often say that while at camp they feel accepted just the way they are, without judgment. In the words of one camper, "Camp is my getaway. I can be myself. I come back every year because it's the one place I feel safe."

After hearing this same message from many different campers over the years, I have come to understand more clearly that many campers don't feel as accepted for who they are when they're not at camp. Taking a look at the lives my own kids lead outside of camp, it's easy for me to see how hard it is to "be you" in a world that pressures kids to fit in. With much of their social lives being lived online and not face-to-face, kids spend a lot of time presenting themselves and their lives as far from "real" as one can get. Being genuine, or even being in touch with who they really are, can become challenging. Finding people who accept them just the way they are, and embracing their own unique personality and strengths, is the furthest thing from

our kids' minds when they walk into middle school or post and chat online. Instead, many are so desperate to fit in, to be popular, and to be liked, that they often go to extremes to *not* be themselves.

At home, our children need to feel accepted for who they are instead of feeling compared to others or pressured to pursue interests that are more valued by parents or our culture at large. When parents recognize and encourage their unique strengths and interests, children feel accepted. Parents can encourage children to be themselves by showing their own quirky traits and expressing positive feelings about people who are doing unique things. At camp, being goofy or what would be considered uncool in the real world becomes the norm, because counselors model for campers that it's okay to just relax and be themselves. New campers quickly learn that they will be treated with kindness and respect, accepted and embraced for who they are, regardless of their quirks. At camp we embrace and celebrate individuality, and we model this in our interactions with fellow counselors and our campers. By embracing and celebrating your child's individuality, you, too, can create this same culture of acceptance at home.

What can parents learn from camp counselors to foster feelings of acceptance? Perhaps the most important lesson is what to focus on in conversations with kids. Summer camp is, naturally, not a place where kids get asked much about school. Instead, counselors focus on asking kids questions about what they like, their goals, and their dreams. Encouraging kids to share stories about themselves is one way counselors get to know their campers better. Camp sessions always start with icebreakers, either as a whole camp, in small groups, or some combination of both. Normally relegated to kindergarten classrooms, "Show and Tell" has made a resurgence at Cape Cod Sea Camps (CCSC). As a get-to-know-you activity, campers and staff share an item that is meaningful to them and explain why. "The objects they share tell you so much about the kids," says director Daniella Garran. In the very first day of camp, counselors at CCSC know something special and unique about each of their campers based on the items they share and the stories they tell.

In describing the traditional first night activities at Yosemite Sierra, Sara Kuljis describes all 200 campers and staff members (120 campers, 80 staff) gathering in a meadow for a series of large and small group icebreaker games. The culminating game, called “The Biggest Fan,” is a huge game of “Ro Sham Bo,” with a twist. Once someone loses in a match, they become a fan of the person they lost to. By the end of the game, two huge groups of fans are cheering on the final two competitors. According to Kuljis, the game creates in kids the feeling of being each other’s fans and encouraging each other that carries over into camp. She says they use the game with all different populations, including inner city groups that attend camp for a week, and all of the kids enjoy the game and feel more connected to each other after playing.

Creating a “camper code,” or what campers at Cheley Colorado Camps call a “Code of Living,” is an important part of the beginning of each camp session and can provide inspiration for families seeking to live together with more kindness and respect. “The campers create a list of five to eight character traits that would be important in their community, traits that they like in their friends. We reference the Code of Living throughout the summer to keep it alive and ingrained in our community,” says Jeff Cheley, owner and director of the camp.

This type of counselor-guided discussion is a common way to start a camp session. Counselors assert that put-downs, negative comments, teasing, or shaming, even done in jest, will not be part of camp life. Counselors also let campers know that the cabin group is like a family and each of them brings different qualities to the group that will add to the experience. Counselors lead a brainstorming discussion of ways campers will support one another. The campers themselves usually come up with ideas like building each other up, encouraging one another, and focusing on positive qualities. These are then introduced as the group norms, written down, and reviewed as needed. Campers who need extra practice at being kind and accepting are given specific coaching by counselors in one-on-one meetings. Even with teenage boys, who are accustomed to disrespecting each other for fun,

and teenage girls, who have grown accustomed to social aggression through backstabbing, gossiping, or leaving people out, counselors are able to model and insist upon a new way of interacting with one another, one that is far from the cultural norm in middle and high school.

B (Belonging): “You Are Valued and Needed Here”

Right from the start of camp, counselors are intentional about doing specific activities that create a sense of belonging. Parents, too, regardless of our children’s ages, can use these same types of activities to foster greater feelings of belonging at home. Games and discussions that help people get to know each other, often called “team building,” are a way of life at camp, done throughout the day during walks between activities, while waiting for programs to start, and around the campfire. Counselors select partners for paired activities like canoeing and charge campers with a “get to know you” task to complete during the activity. For example, the campers might be asked to find three things they have in common. At the end of the activity, they share with the rest of the group what they learned about each other. Cabin group cheers, stories, made-up words, and inside jokes also bring kids closer to their group and make them feel like they belong.

Another way to intentionally create feelings of belonging at home is by leading children through a daily reminiscing of events similar to the discussion counselors lead around the campfire. Around the dinner table or at campfire, children enjoy talking and laughing about shared and individual experiences from their day. Each shared camp or family experience children discuss—even seemingly negative ones like being stuck on the shore of the lake for an hour or having a car break down on vacation—serve as another connection point that helps kids feel a sense of belonging to their group or family.

Group memories, recollected in sharing time, create a deep sense of belonging and are one of the reasons campers say their camp friends are their closest ones despite spending only a few weeks a year with them. Don Whipple, director of Mountain Camp, describes a daily

activity they do to connect with each other called “Roses, Thorns, and Leaves.” Each camper shares their “rose” or highpoint of the day; their “thorn,” which was their most challenging moment; and their “leaf,” which is what they’re looking forward to tomorrow. Parents can elicit these same feelings of belonging at home by intentionally creating times to reflect on individual and family memories. Photos and family videos also create a great starting point for reflecting on shared experiences.

Chores, and the accompanying sense of being an integral and important member of their cabin group, are a way of a life at camp. Working together at cabin cleanup, campfire building, outdoor cooking, setting up their campsite on backpacking trips, clearing and cleaning their dining table, and much more all offer opportunities for campers to feel a sense of belonging and being needed. Kids rarely sit idly by, watching counselors do daily chores. Instead, kids are working side by side, learning the skills they’ll need in order to be able to do these things for themselves, without help, soon. Not only do campers develop good cleaning skills, but they also gain a key understanding of how important each of them is to the successful functioning of their group. Being needed fosters feelings of belonging. Kids benefit from feeling needed at home as much as at summer camp, and shared household chores—despite being a cause of complaint—make children feel that they are an important and valued member of the family.

C (Connection): Unplug and Connect Face-to-Face

I get to come out here and not have my phone—it sounds weird for a teenager to say that, I know—but it’s just fun to be able to not have it, not have to worry about it, not have to stress about it.

Jack

One of the reasons kids feel such a sense of connection at camp is, ironically, that they are disconnected from technology. Most traditional camps continue to embrace being “unplugged” as a fundamental

part of the camp experience. Campers leave their devices at home. No television or Netflix, no texting, no posting, no Snapchat streaks to keep up with. No wondering who has the latest iPhone model. Nor are there worries about low batteries. No screens at all. Just them, face-to-face with other kids, living in the moment without worrying about recording the moment for others to see.

Besides helping them get to know and accept each other, a side benefit of being unplugged for a few weeks is the brain space that gets opened up for reflection. Moments watching the sun set over the lake or the stars shoot across the sky, five-minute quiet times on backpacking trips and hikes, and hours spent doing crafts like friendship bracelets, crocheting, and painting offer opportunities for reflection campers do not normally experience when they are constantly on their screens or rushing from one activity to the next. These moments sometimes give campers clarity about how they'd like to change the way they spend their time, and often lead to decisions about sports or activities they no longer want to participate in, as well as new goals and activities they wish to pursue.

On pickup day from camp, I was chatting with parents (who happened to be former campers and staff themselves) when their son told them, "I've decided not to play baseball this year." He explained that it was taking up too much of his time, and he had other activities he wanted to pursue. Serving as a place where kids can take some time to both get in better touch with who they really are and feel accepted for being themselves is one result of the intentional decision to prohibit screens at camp. It's also the result of scheduling times for reflection and introspection during organized group events. Allowing unscheduled, unstructured downtimes when campers can think about and pursue their own interests is a priority at camp.

Kids growing up in this media and screen-saturated time are a living experiment. We don't know how all this screen use is going to impact their future lives, but we've already seen clues. Generational researcher Jean Twenge has found a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the rise in smartphone use and the rise in adolescent

anxiety, depression, and suicide.⁵ My oldest three children were already close to adulthood when the smartphone and social media craze hit. They were flip phone users until age eighteen. But my youngest kids (born in 2001 and 2003) are experiencing growing up in a different era. They don't remember a time before smartphones were ubiquitous, and they've been playing on devices since they were young. They are what Twenge calls "iGen," and others refer to as "Gen Z." Following the Millennials, they are having their own unique experience of childhood, one that is dominated by screen use by their parents and everyone around them.

It's no surprise that it's now the norm to see a group of kids sitting at Starbucks together or hanging around after school, all looking down at their phones. They've been watching adults and are mimicking what they've seen. While I'm driving my boys and their friends around, they are on their devices the majority of the time. They are often talking about and connecting over what they're doing and seeing on each other's phones, but they are still looking mostly at the screens instead of each other. Until kids are specifically asked to put their devices away, they generally won't voluntarily do so. What most adults are modeling is constant checking of phones during any moment of pause or boredom, so that's what kids are learning to do, too.

A side note here is that when I only have my two teenage sons with me (without any friends), my front passenger seat is a designated "no phone" zone. My reason for this no-device (and no-headphones) rule in the front seat is that before my kids were teens, I saw so many kids sitting with their headphones on in the front seat of their parent's car, not talking or interacting with their parent, and I didn't want that to happen with my own kids. If I'm a passenger with a friend, I interact and talk with my friend. That's the polite, respectful thing to do. So, if my kids are passengers in my car, it's more polite for them to talk with me (or not talk with me) and be in charge of the music or the map. I also put whoever is in the front seat in charge of my phone to answer any texts, etc. They're also free to stare out the window,

a pastime mostly lost to this generation. Plus, my kids often end up talking while we drive around, and we have some of our best conversations in the car.

Another side benefit to my no-phone, shotgun-seat rule is that there are rarely squabbles about who sits in the front seat, and it's not always the oldest in that spot, because there are benefits to both the front and the back seat in my car. I know some parents who enforce a "no screens" rule in their car, preferring their kids use the time for conversation or just the all-important staring out the window that dominated our own childhoods.

Researchers, I am certain, will continue to find that all this screen use is not good for our kids—or for us. In a November 2016 article, the American College of Pediatricians encouraged "parents to become media literate and limit all screen time for their children. Parents, too, must limit their own screen time, especially the use of smartphones, to improve their interaction and engagement with their children."⁶ I, of course, focus on the "interaction and engagement with their children" piece of this advice. The screen problem is not just our children's. It is ours as well. I know, from my own research at camp, that kids feel closer connections, and more happiness, while they're at camp. While there are many factors that contribute to these positive outcomes, I believe that being disconnected from screens is one of the most important variables.

Closer connections come through intentional time spent together, fully present with the person we are with, preferably doing fun and enjoyable things not associated with a screen.

In their book, *The Danish Way of Parenting: What the Happiest People in the World Know About Raising Confident, Capable Kids*, Jessica Alexander and Iben Sandahl share about the Danish tradition of *hygge* (pronounced "hooga"). *Hygge*, they say, involves, "cozying around together [...] lighting candles, playing games, eating nice meals, having cake and tea, and just generally being in each other's company in a cozy atmosphere." This Danish tradition seemed foreign to American-born Alexander (who married a Dane), who was

accustomed to the more limited, around-the-holidays-only family gatherings more prevalent in the United States.

When I interviewed Alexander, I told her that *hygge* reminded me of our nightly campfires where campers gather to relax, chat, roast marshmallows, and pop popcorn. She remembered her own camp days fondly and agreed that campfires were a good example of *hygge*. It makes perfect sense that this Danish tradition of *hygge*—relaxed time just hanging out together and enjoying each other’s company (usually with some food involved)—really is one of the reasons why Danish people consistently rank as the happiest. They are masters at connecting.⁷

Bringing Camp Home: Creating Closer Family Connections

Connection is why we're here. It gives purpose and meaning to our lives.

—Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfect Parenting*

All of this unplugging and *hygge* time to connect is far easier to accomplish at summer camp, gathered around our nightly campfire, than it is at home. But as parents, there are simple steps we can take, based on ideas from camp, to create more connected families. Family, after all, is the place where our kids learn about relationships and experience their first connections. Here are some camp practices you can bring home to foster closer connections:

One Simple Thing

Part of our camp counselors’ job description includes checking in with each camper, every day. We call these check-in meetings “One-on-Ones.” In the camp setting, counselors ask campers specific questions to elicit how campers are feeling. These are individual conversations, out of earshot of

other kids, that last anywhere from two to five minutes. The result? Each camper feels seen, heard, and validated each day, and the counselor knows what's going on with each of their campers and knows how to best support them. At Yosemite Sierra, the tuck-in is their daily check-in with campers, and at CCSC they have a nightly health check to note how kids are feeling physically, but also to find out how they're doing in general. Counselors at CCSC will often ask campers to share a word that describes their day. One of Garran's favorite camper descriptive words? "Fantabulous."

I've often marveled how, in our busy, go-go-go family life, a day can go by without any real one-on-one conversation with our kids that addresses more than what time soccer practice ends. As a simple way to deepen your connection with your kids, try having just one daily one-on-one chat with each of them:

- Turn off or put away your phone (and have them put theirs away, too).
- Give your child your full attention (eye contact, body turned toward them, not thinking about other things).
- Ask them a few open-ended questions. "What was the best part of your day?" is an easy place to start.

Your one-on-one chats can be anytime. You can make it a daily ritual over an after-school snack, while sharing a hot drink, or while tucking them in at bedtime, but that small, concerted daily investment of time will lead to a closer connection between you and your kids.

The Sticky Note Solution

What is something you appreciate about your kid? Let them know that you notice and appreciate them by leaving an encouraging sticky note on their pillow or bathroom mirror. The note can say something like, "Your great sense of humor makes my days happier," or "Thank you for doing the dishes without being asked. I appreciate how you help our home run smoothly." Our kids frequently hear about what

they're doing wrong and how they're falling short. Getting a positive message about a way they make your day better or how they are contributing to the family builds them up.

Make It Fun

In their landmark book *The Whole-Brain Child*, which has changed the way many parents understand children's behavior based on a better understanding of neurology, psychiatrist Daniel J. Siegel and psychotherapist Tina Payne Bryson reiterate the importance of providing kids with opportunities to feel connected within the family. Their Whole-Brain Strategy #11 is, "Increase the Family Fun Factor: Making a Point to Enjoy Each Other."⁸ They explain that it is through play that parents can best prepare kids to connect with others. Here are some ideas I've developed for doing just that:

- Watch a family video or slide show, or look through a family album together, because remembering shared experiences creates connection. Talk about the experiences. What does everyone remember most? What was the best part? The worst? One famous Monke family home video includes my then two-year-old daughter exclaiming with glee after taking the wrapping off of a gift, "A new box!" We've rewatched that video many times, laughing about her excitement over packaging.

- 100 Memories: Over the final few weeks of each year, my family creates a list of one hundred memories from the previous twelve months. We usually start the list over dinner on a legal pad, and we keep the pad handy so that everyone can keep adding to the list. We generally start with the big events of the year. If someone graduated, got their driver's license, or had some other big accomplishment, that goes on the list. But funny and other smaller, memorable things also end up on the list, especially as we get into the higher numbers. Brainstorming together is a fun experience in itself, and the remembering of our shared experiences makes us all feel closer. As my kids are getting older, with three of the five home only for occasional vacations,

I am more and more thankful for this annual practice, which not only reminds us of our collective and individual important and memorable events of the year, but also serves as a family history to help us remember the experiences we've shared.

- **Shared Outdoor Activities (even ones not everyone likes):** My husband and I are both runners, so from an early age, we took our kids along to local races where they'd often do the kids' runs while we'd do the adult 5K or 10K. As the kids got older, some became a bit more resistant to getting up early to go to the events. But we stuck with it and still did several races every year. Consistently, the races ended up being fun times together followed by breakfast out. Although there were some complaints at the time, all of our kids look back fondly on our early mornings at the races together. And our adult daughters regularly participate in half marathons and other running events now (sometimes alongside Mom or Dad). More recently, to appease the desires of our two youngest (now teenage boys) and to utilize some of our camp equipment in the "off-season," we've turned to wakeboarding as a family shared activity, and we get out on the lake together as often as we can.

Around the Campfire

When introducing your first "around the campfire" family discussion, you can say something like, "I've been reading about how it can be fun to have some daily family sharing. Let's try it tonight." And then introduce the sharing. To make it a habit, stick with the same sharing topic for a while. A great starting activity (and one that many families use) is "Highs and Lows." Each person shares their high of the day (a good thing that happened) and a low from the day (something that didn't go well). The only rule is that everyone else listens attentively as they look at the person who's sharing. If your kids are over age nine, they may balk at the suggestion of family sharing. Press on. Even if you have a tween or teen who claims to dislike it or shares nonconsequential items, keep going. The opportunity to have

everyone listening to them will eventually grow on them. You may even find, after time, that they will remind *you* about sharing if you forget to get it started.

A great sharing conversation can also begin with asking everyone to share the answer to a question. We've had a box of Table Topics on our table for years, and those have been fun questions to ponder.⁹ Taking some time each day as a family, during dinner or at bedtime, to ask a "Question for Connection" (see the "Resources" section) or another question, and listen intently to each other's answers, is a great way to continue fostering closer connections in your family. These simple questions can sometimes elicit unexpected responses and can go a long way toward helping us know what makes our kids tick as well as showing them our interest and support. Many of the questions will also help kids know you better and learn some of the stories that made you the adult you are.

I've marveled at some of the things my children have mistakenly assumed about me that aren't true. My son once commented about me spending all my time in the library during college. He assumed this vision of me based on his experience seeing my voracious reading habit and my diligence in my master's program. I had the opportunity to share that the diligent student I was as a forty-seven-year-old adult was very different from my college self, and it led to a good conversation about how I didn't know what I was most interested in learning about during my college years and therefore was more enthused by football games and other social events than by my studies. Sometimes, I learned, our kids think that we were always the way we are now. It's reassuring for them to learn that we took some time to develop into who we are now and that they, too, will take some time to grow into their best adult selves. By learning about each other through asking questions and sharing stories, we gain a deeper understanding that leads to greater acceptance as well as closer connections.

Family Meeting Topic: Screen Time

If you have younger kids, I advise starting at a very young age to limit screen time and not allow devices to be the go-to thing when bored

in line, at a restaurant, and so on. It is much easier to give them more screen time when they get older than to take time away. Have a family meeting to set the rules around screen usage. Following are examples of screen rules some families (including my own) have established during kids' early screen years:

- All devices are used and charged at home (not bedrooms) and shut down at least one hour before bedtime.
- At-home, non-homework-related tech use is limited to thirty minutes on weekdays, two hours on weekends. The weekend hours will include any TV time. Keeping track of time is your own responsibility, and you lose screen time for not keeping track or going over.
- Use one screen at a time.
- If you want to get an extra hour of screen time, read a book for an hour.
- All schoolwork gets finished before screen time.
- If you respond with a crabby attitude when you're told to put your device away, you lose your next day's screen time.

Now that our kids are older teens, they are allowed more time on their devices, but we've continued to insist that at 9:00 p.m. on school nights, devices are plugged in and stored in the downstairs office, far from their bedrooms. Weekends bring a later screen curfew (11:00 p.m.) and charging in the same location. Dinners and other meals are also screen-free zones in our house.

If you have older kids and you're concerned that you and your kids are spending too much time on screens, a family meeting can be a good way to motivate everyone to change their habits. You can brainstorm together an agreement about screen rules everyone (even parents) can agree to. Begin with having everyone (including parents) answer the following questions, loosely based on a counseling approach developed by clinical psychologists William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick called "Motivational Interviewing,"¹⁰ which is

effective in inspiring people to change when they feel ambivalence about the change:

- What do you enjoy most about being on your phone (or whatever device is your “main” one)?
- What bothers you about being on your phone?
- What are some of the good things that come out of using your phone?
- What are some of the bad things that come from using your phone?
- What are some of the benefits to your relationships that come from using your phone?
- What are some of the problems phone use has caused in any of your relationships?
- How much time are you currently using your phone each day?
- Have you noticed in yourself or heard about any negative impacts of screen use?
- What are some positive changes that might result from us using our phones less?
- What fun activities could we do together instead of being on our phones?
- How do you think less screen time would impact our family?

Depending on how the discussion goes, and how receptive to change each of you are, you can next brainstorm some guidelines you can all agree to follow. If you’ve had no rules around screens, I would start with making one small change. And if you don’t already have these rules in place, I would recommend that no devices be allowed at family dinner or in bedrooms. Yes, this may require purchasing old-fashioned alarm clocks for everyone, but it’s a worthwhile investment. Charging devices in a location other than bedrooms is good for everyone’s—including adults’—health. Researchers have found that everyone gets a better night’s sleep with less screen use within one hour before bed and phones turned off at night, so that notifications don’t disturb sleep.

End the meeting with deciding on a follow-up time to see how the new guidelines are going for everyone. Adjust accordingly. Changing habits is extremely hard, but kids may actually feel and be able to articulate some of the benefits of reduced screen time. I know at camp—where our screen rules are clear and easy to enforce (none, ever)—kids often comment to me about how much they’re enjoying the break. Brace yourself for some resistance (maybe even from yourself) but stay strong. Your family’s closer connections will be worth it.

Diving Deeper

Author Brené Brown says that “love and belonging are a birthright,” and that we need to make sure our children know, in no uncertain terms, that they belong in our family and in our home. And that requires, as parents, that we provide firm leadership regarding respect and kindness.

How connected are you all feeling in your family? What adjustments do you want to make? A good place to start is by asking yourself (and your co-parent, if you have one), the following questions:

- Are respect and kindness the norm in our family?
- Does each family member feel accepted and valued for who they are?
- Do kids contribute to the household by doing chores and do they understand they are needed to make the family run smoothly?
- Are there any non-screen-related family “traditions” (e.g., playing ping-pong, a card game, evening walks around the neighborhood with the dog) that we do regularly?

Have a family meeting to create a “Family Contract” and give each family member the chance to talk about how everyone wants to treat each other. I would use some significant event as the reason for this meeting so that it’s a natural time of new beginning. A new calendar year, a new school year, and the start of summer are all transition times that may lend themselves to calling a meeting to regroup and talk about your family.

For the contract to be effective, you'll need to start with a blank piece of paper and let everyone give their input. Here are the questions for each family member to answer:

- What are we doing well to get along as a family?
- What are we not doing well?
- How can I change/adjust my own behavior to make our family more kind and respectful? (This is good because each person, including parents, needs to contribute their own idea for how they can contribute.)
- What are guidelines we want to live by as a family?

For younger kids at camp, their answers and ideas often revolve around seemingly small things like “Ask before you sit on my bed.” This is age appropriate and just fine. Respect all input and make sure that at least one of each person's ideas gets in the contract. Word the guidelines in the positive.

Most likely, if you've all contributed, you'll have some good, specific guidelines for your family to live by. I would limit the guidelines to no more than five key points. The only imperative things that you need to make sure are in there (in some form) are:

- Respect—We will treat each other with respect. We will address concerns, needs, or problems with empathy and not be dismissive of others' feelings, even if we disagree.
- Kindness—We will build each other up with kind words and actions and not put each other down.

By establishing family practices where close relationships are fostered through intentionally creating feelings of acceptance and belonging, we provide our kids with the foundation on which to build a life full of connection and fulfillment. Our children's ability to form close, positive relationships with others is the best predictor of their future success in all areas of life. Therefore, experiencing close connections

at home is vitally important for our kids and well worth our time and focus. It is only when our kids feel this close connection with us that they will be open to our guidance and behavior coaching. Psychologist Tina Payne Bryson coined a phrase I use to remember this concept and teach to camp counselors: “connection before correction.”¹¹ A close relationship and connection with our kids always needs to be our first priority. Of course, our kids also need help learning how to behave appropriately. Parenting techniques to elicit our kids’ best behavior is what we’ll cover next.