

AN OPEN LETTER FROM A CAMP DIRECTOR - CAMPERS, PARENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA



A few thoughts from a Camp Director. An educational letter to parents sending their children to summer camp, the use of social media and Whatsapp groups.

Dear Parents,

We are ready and excited for Mesorah 2017. We have spent the past 10 months planning in order to give our campers the best summer experience possible. Another sold out season with over 1,100 amazing campers and staff members – all of whom are a Director's dream. We want only the best for our campers. I am often asked the question: What do you work on throughout the year? Here is the answer. We plan and prepare during our "off season" with our staff so that during the summer our campers will:

- Learn about responsibility and daily routine
- Meet new friends and learn how to socialize in an appropriate and healthy manner
- Problem solve without parental pressure and involvement
- Break free from the dependence of smart phones, social media and electronic devices
- Cultivate their own personalities
- Participate in the most cutting edge programs with professional sports players and creative art specialists
- Most importantly develop a love for Torah filled with ruach

I enjoy that first moment when the campers arrive to camp. There is an amazing look on their faces when they see friends they have not seen in person during the year. It's the friendship and bond they will experience 24 hours a day without the intrusion of technology. Within 10 minutes of arriving, all campers hand in their cell phones for the summer and I have news for the outside world: While some are hesitant at first because the cell phone is a yearlong addiction, within 10 minutes their phones are forgotten. Almost immediately, campers are in their bunks, hanging out, playing ball and we hear the beautiful sound of socializing and excitement in the air. This is the reality of camp.

Our jobs as parents: Let's set the stage for a successful summer for our children in a positive way. Why do we need to have negativity in our lives and then pass that along to our children, which may cause them to be nervous during the summer? Parent's social pressures do not need to be shared with their children and we should not think for a minute that what bothers us as parents bothers them too. In addition, it's important for children to learn resilience and conflict resolution. It's ok for them to be nervous and have a child in their bunk who they are not great friends with. In the future, they probably will have to work with people who they may dislike and have to figure out how to get along with to be successful in school and in "real life". What better place to learn that than in the "fun and relaxed" atmosphere of summer camp.

What have we done? We have developed the most exciting program for your children for 7 weeks. They enjoy every minute of it. Yes, there are rules and procedures – all put in place for the safety and security of our children. I have always encouraged parents to communicate with me at any time; I would do anything for our campers, to see their continued success. Even if after a conversation a rule or decision is not changed to your satisfaction, remember that we are listening to you, respect you and take note of our discussions. As we often tell our children "no" is still an answer – it may not be the answer you are looking for, but it is the best answer/decision for those circumstances.

After such conversations/policy announcements, often the next step is to post on a social media platform. Social media usage can be positive if used correctly. At times it has been used as a platform for conversations that don't belong in the public eye. Private Whatsapp groups have been created to discuss potentially contentious topics, instead of using the "old fashion" plan of communicating directly with the administration. What is even worse is that rumors begin about items that are not even true; richilus and lashon hara are being shared for no reason. We often think that our children are not following these conversations and communications but they do hear and know about them and as a result, will start the summer with their parent's preconceived notions in their minds.

Bullying is one of the most important topics that we all focus on in school, camp and at home. What's interesting to me is the actions we don't want our children participating in or being recipients of, we ourselves are doing on social media. Facebook has become the place where a policy from an institution is highlighted and mocked, instead of calling the institution and asking for a logical explanation. There will be times that you may agree with a policy and times that you won't. That is OK because you are not always aware of the entire picture which precipitated a change in policy. That does not mean that one has to air any "dirty laundry" on social media or in a Whatsapp group. Ask questions – but of the right people. In my experience as an educator and camp director, children like to learn the "why" and when decisions and topics are explained to them logically, they learn and respect those decisions and are more inclined to follow them. I sit with campers for hours talking about rules and decisions that they may not agree with – they do want to understand what factors lead to certain decisions. They need to have a chance to learn and to discuss without being influenced by social media platforms and our negativity.

As we prepare for the summer, you will see all of the excitement and cutting edge programs and events that we have planned for your children. You will also receive rules and expectations that are implemented for the benefit and safety of your children. I ask that you refrain from using social media and other communication outlets to express any negative feelings you may have about them and focus on our children's growth in a happy and health way. I encourage you to call and discuss topics with our administrative team. They are wonderful people, role models and top educators. Your children will enjoy life more and learn better from their life experiences without undue influence from social media and Whatsapp groups. Look for all of our positive posts on Facebook and Instagram. Like them, share them and enjoy the great moments that our children are experiencing.

If you have any questions or concerns feel free to call me at any time.

Looking forward to an amazing and safe summer!

Ari Katz

originally appeared on chinuchthatworks.com