

# Kids On Overload

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**H**ave you ever had such an intense day that, when you finally stopped to rest, you were too energized to relax? With all we know about the pace and intensity of the world for today's kids, it isn't difficult to imagine how hard it is for them to relax.

As adults, we may have periodic high-energy days that effect our times of rest, but for today's kids, those days are "normal." As Leonard Sweet, a Christian futurist, said,

*"Relationship issues stand at the heart of postmodern culture... the more digitally enhanced the culture becomes, the more flesh-and-blood human the enchantments. The more impersonal the transactions (economic, social, etc.), the deeper the hunger for relationships and community... The more connected we become electronically, the more disconnected we can become personally."*

(From Post Modern Pilgrims, Broadman & Holman publishers)

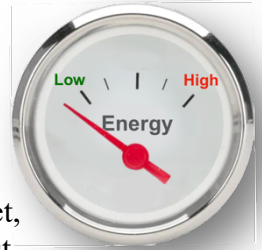
The emotional side-effects of this high-tech, rapid-fire lifestyle are no longer left at home while packing for camp; they are now rolled up with the campers' sleeping bags and spare socks.

Years ago, "going to camp" meant that city kids were transported to a new environment (usually in the mountains) for a few days of organized, character-building events and programs. Kids would see, smell, and experience God through His creation and close interaction with godly mentors. "Going to camp" is basically the same today, with the exception of one major difference. More and more campers are bringing with them an extra "emotional suitcase" filled with anger, depression, fear, and disconnectedness. This extra suitcase is the result of the kids' overloaded lives. Broken homes, multiple sports involvements, music lessons, and even church programming can create "overloaded" kids. Today's camp counselors face the challenge of not only knowing the camp schedule, but also the necessity of knowing how to deal with that extra "emotional suitcase."



The rising incidence of homesickness, bed-wetting, eating disorders, bullying, and anger is a constant challenge to the camp counselor who basically just wants to enjoy interacting with the campers in the beautiful surroundings. Just as resting after an intense day takes more patience and some purposeful, "pre-rest activities," today's camp counselors must be prepared to help campers "unload," or "slow-down" when they first arrive at camp.

Preparing camp counselors for the new "culture" of campers is always a constant challenge. A "good camp" is created long before the buses arrive. When a kid tells his or her parent that camp was "fun," that is one of the best indicators of successful planning and preparation on the part of the camp director, staff, counselors, and church representatives. Preparing to welcome and nurture these "overloaded" kids requires hours of prayerful creativity in the design of camp activities, schedules, and pre-camp communications. Here are a few ways to help the campers unload more effectively before and during the first day of camp.



1. **Church Representative “Briefing”** – Acquaint the church representative with the issue of dealing with overloaded kids. Pass on suggestions, for parents, regarding the campers’ eating and sleeping well prior to coming to camp. Encourage the church representative to train those counselors accompanying the campers on the bus, or car pools, to make the trip to camp as relaxing and low-energy as possible by playing quiet, soothing music, talking about school or other life issues, stopping periodically for “rest-walks” and to begin breathing cleaner air, etc.

2. **“Red Carpet Walk”** – Lengthen the distance the kids have to walk, from the “drop-off” zone to the registration or check-in tables. This walk, while carrying suitcases and sleeping bags will help the “unloading” process begin as well as provide an initial, guaranteed, relationship-building time between the counselors and the campers. (Camp vehicles should be ready to transport campers who can’t walk that distance, or transport heavy suitcases, etc. Changes in weather will change this plan as well.)



3. **“Campers’ Choice” Pavilion** – After settling into their cabins, the counselors and campers walk to the “Campers’ Choice Pavilion.” At the pavilion, the campers are presented with a list of choices regarding several activities or experiences at camp. These can be choices about food, crafts, sports activities, schedule options, team assignments, etc. The counselors assist the campers in their choices and discuss the options. This experience permits the campers to feel a certain level of “ownership,” or “control” over their camping experience. This is a low-level experience which is “seasoned” with plenty of counselor comments, encouragement, and support.



4. **Increased Counselor/Camper Ratios** – The best “antibiotic” to an overloaded kid is a safe relationship with a caring adult mentor. Increased needs in the campers demand increased connections with mentors. This may include increased counselor/camper ratios required by the camp.

5. **Increased Guided Interactions** – The counselors need to be aware of the importance of “guided interactions” between them and the campers. Jesus was a master at these unplanned encounters with people. Except for the “just me” times mentioned below, the counselors need to be sitting, standing, walking, talking, eating, playing, or laughing with the campers. During these encounters, conversations are “guided” to life issues or personal needs of the campers. Conversation starters such as, “So, tell me about your dad,” “Tell me about your family,” “Tell me about your most difficult class at school,” or “Tell me about your friends,” can break the ice and begin the process of connecting with campers’ feelings and emotions. Guided interactions can be “risky,” but they shouldn’t be avoided. Counselors need to know the basic principles and limitations of these interactions such as:



- Don’t give advice, give understanding
- The best interaction technique is good listening
- Always get counsel from a supervisor at camp when encountering reports of abuse
- Always, unless abuse exists, encourage the camper to talk with the parent(s)
- Always use scripture to bring hope and wisdom
- Protect trust (unless abuse is reported)
- Several short encounters are better than one long encounter
- Pray with the camper during several encounters at camp
- Wave or smile at the camper when seen at a distance.

6. **“Just Me” Times** – Provide periodic “just me” times for campers. During these times, the campers are given the opportunity to be alone and quiet. Being quiet is becoming more and more difficult for today’s kids. They are always “bombed” with sounds and activity. To be quiet may be actually be painful for them. Make sure counselors are around, at a distance, to assist those campers who need extra encouragement, or for those campers who don’t want to be alone. Give them options for their “Just Me Time” such as:

- Writing letters to be sent home.
- Coloring, painting, or drawing the area around them.
- Writing poems or songs about their feelings.
- Filling in the blanks on a story template that is given to them.
- Praying and listening.

