

Exploring the True Potential in Thirteen-Year-Old Boys

by Jeffrey Leiken, M.A.

Several years ago I was asked to meet with a group of thirteen-year-old boys at a resident camp. They'd been together at this camp for years, and now they were beginning to pick on each other, fight, and cause trouble around camp.

Rather than do the typical meeting they'd grown accustomed to, we had a very different discussion. Instead of talking about their problems, I asked them to introduce themselves and then asked for others — not the boys themselves — to tell me about them. The only catch was that they were only allowed to say positive things about each other.

The first one introduced himself and then others were asked to tell me what was positive about him. Not surprisingly, they began by telling me he was a "good basketball player." Then one boy said, "He's funny." To which another boy quickly added, "Yeah, funny LOOKING!"

The boys began to laugh out loud. It was no surprise that they only stayed serious for about a minute — the original serious tone was dissipating rapidly. The counselors began to laugh, also. No doubt this kind of put down was common place in their lives, as well.

One of the campers looked up and saw the look on my face, one which sent a strong message of dissatisfaction. Very quickly he told the others, "Guys, come on. Be quiet. He's serious."

This is a familiar experience — how to work with boys in a way that allows them to explore their emerging mature side — a side that is developing but is rarely expressed.

With a serious look and stern voice, I said, "You know it would be easy to make all sorts of sarcastic jokes, but then I would never learn positive things about the others. So for just this meeting, let's continue without the put-downs and sarcasm."

The boys complied and, as a result, amazing, insightful, and sensitive, positive comments were shared. It was evident that when they no longer felt the need to be on their guard against critical remarks, they could just be kind to one another. The counselors began to make moments like this happen daily — typically in the evening at bedtime — and this group's entire summer changed.

Recent news articles have reported that nearly half the soldiers fighting in the resistance in Sudan are boys fifteen years old and under. In our country, boys of that age can't even be trusted to remember to do their homework! We raise our boys to remain boys much longer than many other cultures. The typical American thirteen-year-old boy can barely sit still and be serious for more than a few minutes, yet when they finally find the right people with whom to be serious, it's extraordinary how much they really have to say. It is not that we would want a civil war to make them more mature, but at what point does the process of maturing them into men begin? At what age do we raise the level of expectation?

Individually, boys of this age can be at markedly different stages of development — physically, psychologically, socially, and intellectually. Yet, typical camp counselors tend to treat all thirteen-year-old boys with a collective sameness. This utterly denies their individuality and shuts out those who want and need to be talking to someone who can understand.

You Can Make a Difference

There is so much that you can do within your camp to influence these young teens to choose a path of

responsibility toward manhood — yes, even as early as age thirteen! The design must be to create experiences for them that intentionally address the changes in their lives, the questions in their heads, and the yearnings they have to become their own man. You must believe and expect that they are ready for this! The key is to find the balance between letting them be kids and treating them as you would treat young adults. They will never act like young adults until we begin to treat them as such.

Camps that have successfully reached and encouraged boys of this age are endlessly amazed by just how much leadership and responsibility they are capable of — and how insightful and aware they can really be.

In fact, when you spend time with boys in a setting like this, some of the most common myths are dispelled, and you learn something new.

Some of the most common myths say that thirteen-year-old boys:

- are irresponsible;
- only want to do things that are fun; and
- can't be serious except when they're in trouble.

Actually, if given the proper nurturing and environment, thirteen-year-old boys commonly:

- are curious about life's deeper questions;
- are capable of acts of profound generosity and kindness;
- have a desire to feel emotionally close and connected; and
- want guidance that teaches them to feel personally empowered.

What can you do at your camp?

- Create rituals that generate discipline and pride. The first day of camp, a counselor stopped his thirteen-year-old campers while walking to the dining hall for their first meal. He had them "huddle up" shoulder to shoulder. In a very positive and enthusiastic tone he said, "Guys — get this: we are going to be the best table in the dining hall — all summer. We will take turns, share, do everything right. We'll win awards, get to go first more than anyone else, and get extra privileges! Is everybody in???" He remained so enthusiastic about this that they went the entire summer without incident. At one point, the campers on their own decided to go in the kitchen and help the kitchen staff. One day they woke up extra early and set the tables for the entire camp. People joked with the counselor about what he bribed them with, not believing it could possibly be because of another reason. This counselor simply got his campers excited about being disciplined, and they did the rest.
- Schedule activities that foster and demand teamwork and group unity. Last summer one group of counselors planned a special trek into the woods for their thirteen-year-old boys. The boys were broken into several groups and each given a set of instructions on how to navigate to the first of a dozen secret hiding places where they would meet and engage in discussions with "great sages" or wise men (played by other counselors). The instructions included different variations such as having to go from one place to another silently or by making different boys take the lead. When they found their sages, they were asked questions that demanded introspection and consideration. Only when they'd answered sufficiently were they given the next set of directions to find their next sage. Initially, the boys complained that this would be boring but when it was over were begging to do it again the next day. They loved the questions and the sense of adventure and camaraderie.
- Tell stories that generate deeper thinking and discussions — especially at bedtime. There is perhaps nothing so primal to the experience of boyhood as that of older men telling stories to younger men — especially while sitting together in the dark. Rather than just telling scary stories, counselors can tell all sorts of stories — stories of adventure, of people making tough choices, of people overcoming great obstacles. One counselor called these evening story and discussion sessions, "Cabin Summit

Meetings." The boys loved them and looked forward to them. They felt a camaraderie sharing these experiences together at night, and it carried over to their attitude and feeling of closeness during the days at camp.

The Key to Success

To make any of this happen requires that you intentionally create these experiences for boys of this age. Perhaps the best benefit from implementing these activities at your camp is the impact they have on counselors. Many are inspired by the feeling of leading these boys in such a substantial way. They find it awakens in them an almost inherent desire to pass on the knowledge they've gained through their own experiences. When you add these activities and insist on this culture, the results may indeed astound you. The same campers you thought would never cooperate may indeed be the ones who lead the way!

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