



# *Why Camp Can Be So Hard*

**F**OR MANY FAMILIES, CAMP REPRESENTS HOPE—a chance for kids to build confidence, friendships, and independence. But for parents of children with ADHD, camp can also bring a familiar worry: Will my child be able to handle it?

I recently spoke with Dan Selmer, a psychotherapist who also works inside a traditional day camp through a therapeutic-informed program. We talked about why camp can be especially challenging for kids with ADHD and why, at the same time, it can be one of the most powerful environments for growth.

I posed the questions parents often ask. Dan's responses reflect what he sees every summer, up close and in real time.

**CINDY GOLDRICH: Why does camp seem to bring out so many challenges for kids with ADHD?**

**DAN SELMER:** I split my time between two worlds that overlap more than people realize. In my psychotherapy practice, I sit with families trying to make sense of emotional regulation, anxiety, and ADHD. In the summer, through our program embedded within a traditional day camp, I'm standing in the middle of real camp life, watching those same challenges play out in real time.

What I've learned is this: kids don't suddenly become different people at camp. Camp just makes everything more visible. So, when a child with ADHD struggles, I don't assume lack of motivation or poor behavior. More often, it's the environment asking more than their skills can handle in that moment. That's where I always start.

**What kinds of struggles do camps actually see?**

At camp, it often sounds like:

- "He won't follow directions."
- "They melt down over small things."
- "She keeps having social challenges."

But when you've spent years watching kids in groups, patterns become clear. Transitions pile up. Noise builds. Social expectations get blurry. And once a child stops feeling successful or connected, things can unravel quickly.

One of the biggest lessons we've learned running a therapeutic-informed program inside a traditional camp is that *fun is not a bonus*. Fun is how kids stay regulated long enough to learn and participate. When fun drops out, everything gets harder.

**Why is camp both so hard and so valuable at the same time?**

Camp demands flexibility, emotional control, and social awareness all day long. That's a big ask for kids with ADHD.

At the same time, camp is where kids practice skills in the most meaningful way possible. There's no worksheet for recovering after losing a game or figuring out how to rejoin a group after a rough moment. Camp is where that happens.

The goal isn't to prevent hard moments. Hard moments are part of growth. The goal is to help kids recover and rejoin without shame. That's where real confidence comes from.



**for Kids with ADHD**

Cindy Goldrich, EdM, ADHD-CCSP,  
with Dan Selmer, LCSW

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**At camp and in therapy, the kids who thrive aren't the ones who never struggle. They're the ones who know they can recover and still belong.**

### What helps counselors support kids successfully?

Most counselors are doing the best they can with limited training and a lot of responsibility. I've watched incredibly caring teen staff doubt themselves because they think they're "doing it wrong" when a child struggles.

What helps most isn't more rules or consequences. It's support and clarity.

We coach staff to slow things down and to get curious rather than escalate. A calm counselor is often the most powerful intervention in a difficult moment.

Simple language matters:

- "I can see this is hard."
- "Let's figure this out together."
- "Help me understand what just happened."

Honestly, getting a child back into the fun often does more than sitting them out to reflect on their actions. Connection helps kids regulate. Isolation rarely does.

### What do social challenges look like at camp, up close?

In therapy, parents talk about their child's difficulty making friends or feeling left out. At camp, we can often see exactly why.

Kids with ADHD tend to struggle with the *invisible* parts of social life:

- How to join a group already in motion
- When to adjust behavior to match the environment
- Understanding how their actions impact others

Instead of blaming the child for misbehavior, we coach in real time:

- "What do you think the group needs right now?"
- "How can we jump back in?"

When kids feel supported rather than spotlighted, they're much more open to learning.

### What do camps wish parents understood going in?

The most helpful information parents can share [with camps] isn't just a diagnosis or broad descriptions. It's patterns.

Things like:

- "Transitions are tough."
- "He needs help calming down before problem-solving."
- "She does better when expectations are previewed."

That kind of insight allows camps to respond thoughtfully instead of defensively. In both clinical work and camp work, collaboration is always more effective than control.



### How can parents prepare kids before camp starts?

The best preparation for camp isn't perfecting behavior. It's building recovery skills.

We encourage families to practice:

- Asking for help when needed
- Articulating when something feels hard
- Coming back after mistakes

At camp and in therapy, the kids who thrive aren't the ones who never struggle. They're the ones who know they can recover and still belong.

Good behavior isn't about avoiding hard moments. It's about knowing you're still welcome after them.

### The bigger picture

When camps lead with safety, connection, and fun, kids with ADHD don't just get through the summer—they grow.

And when counselors are supported to stay calm, curious, and human, the entire community benefits.

That's not lowering expectations. It's building the skills that make expectations possible. **A**



**Daniel Selmer, LCSW-R**, is the founder of Endeavor Psychotherapy Associates and director of Endeavor @ Crestwood Day Camp. For over twenty years in private practice, he has assisted children, teens, young adults, and their families in navigating behavioral, social, and everyday challenges. A lifelong summer camp enthusiast, he believes deeply in the transformative power of camp and community. The benefits of working on social and emotional challenges in real time are immeasurable.



**Cindy Goldrich, EdM, ADHD-CCSP**, is a nationally recognized ADHD educator, parent coach, and author. For over fifteen years, she has supported parents and professionals in better understanding ADHD and executive function, with a focus on strengthening relationships, building skills, and creating calmer, more connected homes. She is the author of *8 Keys to Parenting Children with ADHD* and is known for translating research into practical, compassionate strategies families can use in everyday life.