

From Youth Leader to Staff: Reflecting on Play, Power, and Connection

Purpose of this reflection

This short reading and reflection is meant to support your transition from Youth Leader to staff. Many of the skills that made you a strong youth leader—playfulness, humor, energy, and connection—are still important. This document invites you to reflect on how those strengths sometimes need to shift when working with younger campers and when you are in a staff role.

This is not about doing something *wrong*. It is about growing into a role with more responsibility, awareness, and impact.

1. Intention vs. Impact

As humans, we often connect through humor, teasing, or playful challenge. Among peers, this can feel bonding and fun. With younger children, however, the *impact* of these actions may be very different from the *intention*.

Children ages 5–10 are still developing: - Emotional regulation - Perspective-taking (understanding others' intentions) - A sense of safety, ownership, and control

Because of this, behaviors such as teasing, poking, or taking a child's toy— even when meant playfully—can feel confusing, upsetting, or unsafe to them.

Reflection:

- Can you think of a time when your intention was to connect, but a child seemed to shut down, pull away, or become upset? - What clues did the child give you about how it landed?

2. The Role of Power in Connection

Once you are staff, there is a power difference—whether you feel it or not. Staff set the emotional tone, the rules, and the sense of safety in the group.

For children: - Staff actions feel bigger and more meaningful than peer actions - Kids cannot easily opt out of interactions with staff - Even playful teasing can feel like pressure or loss of control

This means staff humor needs to be especially intentional and grounded in care.

Reflection:

- How do you think a camper experiences you differently now than when you were a youth leader? - How might power change the way humor or teasing is received?

3. “Adding to Play” vs. “Taking From Play”

A helpful guideline when connecting with younger campers is:

Add to play, don’t take from it.

Adding to play might look like: - Joining an activity already happening - Commenting with curiosity or admiration - Asking permission before touching materials or toys

Taking from play might look like: - Taking an object to be funny - Interrupting play to test a reaction - Using teasing to get attention or engagement - Focusing attention repeatedly on the same child rather than the group

Reflection:

- When you want to connect with a camper, what are some ways you naturally *add* to their play? - Are there moments when you might slip into taking or testing instead?

4. Attention, Attachment, and Favoring

As humans, we naturally feel drawn to certain kids—those who are especially expressive, funny, affectionate, eager for attention, or remind us of ourselves. It can feel good to be sought out, admired, or “chosen” by a camper.

To a degree, this is normal and human.

But as staff, our role asks us to hold a wider lens.

When attention consistently flows toward a few children:

- Other kids may feel invisible or less valued
- The favored child may rely too heavily on staff rather than peers
- Group dynamics can quietly shift toward imbalance
- Staff can unintentionally reinforce dependency instead of independence

Our goal is not to pull away from connection, but to **spread it intentionally**—and to help kids connect with *each other*, not just with us.

Reflection:

- Are there campers you naturally gravitate toward or who seek you out more often?
- How do you notice your attention being distributed across the group?
- What helps you gently redirect a child toward peers while still honoring their need for connection?

4. Connection That Builds Safety

At Monkey Business Camp, strong connection looks like: - Kids feeling seen, respected, and safe - Staff being playful *and* predictable - Humor that invites kids in rather than puts them on the spot

Examples of connection-building language: - “That looks important—tell me about it.” - “Do you want help, or do you want me to watch?” - “Can I join you?”

Reflection:

- Which of these feel most natural to you? - Are there phrases or approaches you’d like to try more intentionally?

5. Looking Ahead

Growing into a staff role is a process. Reflection, feedback, and conversation are part of becoming a strong counselor and community member.