

idea corner

Self-Understanding Weekends

Take a group of fifth and sixth graders away from their usual classroom setting for a week of professional counseling. Add their teachers, parents, counselors, and 4-H agent as adult leaders. And you have a Self-Understanding Weekend that results in the students learning more about themselves and others.

West Virginia 4-H has sponsored Self-Understanding Weekends for the past 8 years on an area basis, where limited numbers of students from each county have participated in 2-day sessions of small group discussions on topics of their choice, and traditional camping activities. But the demand by students to attend these weekends kept increasing. So working with the county's two middle-school counselors, we decided to hold one just for them.

A professor of counseling at the West Virginia College of Graduate Studies volunteered to serve as director of the adults to lead the students in their group discussions. He recruited some of his counseling graduate students, teachers from their schools, and parents to serve in this capacity.

"We knew this would be asking a lot of the adults—to have them give up a weekend to work with the youths," the professor said. "But, the response was fantastic."

The response of the students was fantastic!

The number needed, 114, was met easily, and a waiting list was kept in case some of the preregistrants dropped out. "It was really kind of sad," one of the counselors said. "Some students on the waiting list would stop by the counselor's office regularly to see if they could go."

The weekend arrived, and the group left the county for the three-hour drive to the meeting place. One problem was keeping them busy the first evening so they wouldn't get homesick. For some, it was the first time they'd been away from home.

The first evening's activities included "getting-to-know-you" games for the students, and sessions for the counselors. Some of the summer's county camp instructors had volunteered to guide the students through games that introduced participants to one another.

Saturday began at 7:00 a.m. for the group. During the day, they participated in group sessions, recreation, crafts, and preparation for skits to be held that evening.

The group session consisted of value-clarification games adapted from Sidney Simons' book, *Values Clarification* and a 15-minute film designed to spark discussion on topics such as sibling rivalry and playing practical jokes. Recreation came next, and was a must to release tension and pent-up energy after sitting still for 45-minute sessions. Work on crafts gave a quiet resting time before meals and settled the camp down to a "low roar."

"We tried to keep them very busy all day, so they'd be tired enough to rest

by evening," said a counselor. "However, fifth and sixth graders don't wear out very easily."

The students requested a West Virginia 4-H council circle—a program of songs, stories, and stunts around a campfire. Although the winter weather brought below-freezing temperatures, it was held. *The adults performed skits that brought the most laughter.*

The students were surprised to see their teachers acting like "other" people. One student was shocked to see her teacher washing her hair in one of the cabins. It made her seem more human.

Sunday's activities included a group session, vespers, and clean-up.

The reasons why a camp setting was more favorable to a Self-Understanding Weekend than a classroom were:

1. Students have the freedom to roam around the camp.
2. They're in a new setting, and away from home for a short period.
3. They can get closer to nature, especially children from the city.
4. In a camping situation, they're judged by their peers—not by what they do, but by how they relate to others.
5. No stereos, radios, or fancy clothes are allowed. It evens things out for those who attend.
6. Students learn community responsibility. They're responsible to one another for being quiet at certain times, for clearing, and for serving food.

The camp was run very loosely and with flexibility. There were a few hard and fast rules and the philosophy about the camp was made clear.

Self-Understanding Weekends will benefit many more students, when

more interest is generated and funding is made available.

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