

FOUR BASIC COMPONENTS OF A CAMP SOLO PROGRAM
Excerpts from
“Exploring the Power of Solo, Silence and Solitude”
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Solo Experiences in the Summer Camp - Chapter 15
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SOLO DEFINITION for campers:

A solo is an experience where campers:

- Participate in a planned, voluntary activity
- Spend an allotted period of time alone
- Are in a designated, safe location in the wilderness
- Are out of sight (but not earshot) of leaders and peers
- Are under non-intrusive but continual supervision by counselor staff

PURPOSE for Campers is the Opportunity to:

- Be alone with oneself, in a natural environment, supervised and safe.
- Think, reflect, observe. Sing, draw, and write.
- Beyond a few basics, rely on personal resources for food, shelter from the elements, and entertainment.
- Rest, relax, away from daily routine, stresses, pressures
- And afterward share insights gained, fears encountered, observations noted, challenges met, hopes and plans created.

BASIC COMPONENTS:

- Staff - overall plan and selection of individual sites
- Pre-solo briefing of, and agreement from, the participants
- The Solo experience
- Conclusion - food, group debrief and closure

METHOD:

- Leaders locate a section of land, reconnoiter, and map solo sites ahead of time, ensuring (where possible) that soloists will not see or converse with other soloists.
- Assure that all sites are secluded from foot and/or vehicle traffic, or other distracting noises (ideally).

- Establish a central location or Leader Camp on the land, where leaders will remain during solo time.
- Plan time for:
 - The participants to travel to the solo site – include plans for any vehicles.
 - The individual solo experience – a range of a few hours to 24 plus hours.
 - Re-gathering individuals, and debriefing the experience, which may involve a meal.
 - Walking out or traveling back to camp.
- Present the solo exercise to the participants as a personal challenge. It requires commitment to self and peers, not to talk to others. Not leaving the solo site requires trust on the part of all involved. Get agreements from participants, verbal or written.

PARTICIPANTS - WHAT TO GATHER, PACK, BRING:

(Use judgment depending on geographical location, time of year, weather, age of participant, length of solo)

- Sleeping bag and pad
- 3 full quarts of water
- Warm clothes and rain gear, depending on weather
- Tarp for shelter
- Emergency whistle worn around the neck
- Journal and pen/writing materials
- Pack or garbage bag for carrying items
- Food pack containing optional items depending on age and experience level of group – for example, an orange, several bagels, peanuts, raisins, and drink powder
- Any necessary medical prescriptions

PARTICIPANTS - WHAT NOT TO BRING:

- Matches, knife, flashlight, soap, watch, toothbrush or other toiletries, mirror, gum, musical instrument, camera, toilet paper, compass (unless part of the program) lap top, radio, Palm Pilot, cell phone or other means of communication.

STAFF - FIND AND ESTABLISH SITES

- Strategically select locations for individual campers, taking into consideration those who may need assistance, additional support, or a watchful eye, distancing from each other those who may be tempted to visit each other, and assigning outer limit locations to those who really desire seclusion.
- To find the sites in the future, and for those leaders who enter the experience later, mark each one consistently: Make a note cairn (may be used during solos for written communication), create a sturdy tripod of sticks, mark with strips of colored cloth or bandanas. Name the sites if it helps, or ask the participants to name their own site. Examples are Lone Pine Rock, Front Range Hideaway, and Aspen Grove. Mark a topographical map, make your own, or write down compass coordinates stemming from the Leader Camp.

BEFORE SOLO

- Using the previously drawn site map or topographical map, note that is soloing where. Give a copy to each leader.
- Optional and recommended: Establish “note cairns” (a simple and recognizable pile of 4 – 7 rocks or sticks positioned purposefully) for each solo site, a place to leave written communications twice a day. The note cairns should be near each solo site, but far enough that the soloist does not see the coming and going of the leaders. Leaders check the cairns twice a day and respond as needed. Communication notes from participants may be required or voluntary. If required, the note acts as a safety net and participant agreement and compliance is important. The note may tell the leaders how the participant is doing, and/or if there are pressing needs or questions.
- Test to see if whistle blasts can be heard from the farthest solo site to the leader campsite...and adjust your emergency whistle use procedure accordingly.
- Plan, purchase and pack food, and equipment for a meal before or after the concluding debrief. Fruit, soup or stew, light pasta and/or bread are possibilities.
- Pack first aid kit(s) and extra water if site is dry.
- Consider a rain shelter or fire building capabilities in case of inclement weather.

- Pack Solo Journals and whistles for each camper.

STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES ON SOLO DAY:

- Emphasize keeping solo by not intruding upon the physical space and solitude of another. Another's presence, invited or not, will disrupt the strength and flow of the experience of another. Emphasize commitment to solitude. IF a soloist feels they must talk with someone, they should walk to the leader campsite and not disturb a fellow soloist.
- Gather soloists and their gear. Leaders may divide the soloist distribution to conserve time.
- Silently lead the participants, in a group, to their individual sites, beginning with the closest and ending with the farthest. Ideally, leave the group members waiting silently at the "note cairn" while locating the exact solo spot. In this way, some sense of mystery may be maintained...but not much!
- Have a pad and pencil ready if communication is necessary. No need for them to see the site map. Assure that they all know where the leaders reside.
- IF using the "note cairns" check each one according to the scheduled agreement. However, BE QUIET and don't let the soloists see or hear you. It's disturbing and distracting of the soloist's experience. IF you do become visible or audible, don't make eye contact and move away quickly.
- In reverse, soloist "pick up" begins with the farthest participant site, and proceeds in silence, as the leader walks to "collect" the soloists. Leaders may divide the site pick-ups to conserve time.
- Patiently wait for each soloist to bring their gear and join the silent waiting group. End with everyone gathered at the leader's campsite. (Plan enough time for the pick up...some soloists may have completely lost track of time, and that's a *good* thing!) Hurrying may completely undo the rest and relaxation that occurred on the solo.
- Leave site markers, cairns, stick tripods in tact for groups following, unless return with a future group is unlikely - in which case, dismantle upon departure.

ON SOLO DAY: INFORMATION TO CONVEY TO SOLOISTS

- Agree with the participants about the distance they may move from their assigned solo locations, for example, ten feet in any direction.
- Agree with participants that they will not take a hike, go for a swim, take photographs, whittle, change or destroy the environment, or start a fire. Get as creative as the participant and expect the unexpected by anticipating the worst-case scenario.
- Option: Someone participating in a second solo experience may choose to be led, blindfolded to his or her site. Emphasize that the point is not to spend the entire time trying to figure out where they are! But to enter the environment with an open mind, present and observant, as if it were for the very first time.
- Leaders, and not nearby soloists, should be contacted in time of emergency, pending emergency, accident, illness, or emotional trauma.
- Pass out emergency whistles to be worn around participant's necks at all times, even when sleeping. Instruct participants in the use in case of an emergency: three blasts followed by three more, followed by three more, with pauses in between to listen, continuing until help arrives. Make your process clear...do only leaders respond to the blast? Do all who hear the blast go to the sound? Or do they notify the leaders? Or do you need a combination of options?
- Needs such as aspirin for a headache or other simple first aid may be communicated and responded to twice a day, via the note Cairns.
- Tell soloists the approximate hour of the day the notes will be picked up (try one time in mid morning and once in the late afternoon). Remember, they have no watches.
- Relate the approximate hour when leaders will return to "pick them up." Soloists should attempt to be "packed" and ready to leave.
- Before departing each solo site, participants return it to "nature" by re-scattering rocks, sticks and picking up any litter such as orange peels or apple cores.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR THE SOLOIST:

- Later Letter – write a confidential letter, sealed in a self-addressed envelope, and receive it in the mail six months later (sent by the camp office).
- Make a gift from nature (within environmental guidelines) to give to a person in the group, whose name has been previously drawn.
- Suggest finding a totem from the solo area (a natural object such as a rock, cone, piece of wood), which will represent a quality of the solo experience. Sharing the totem and its meaning may become a part of the debrief.
- Provide a “Solo Journal” in which to write a poem, a thank you letter, a song, a re-connection note, a story – to be shared during the debrief, or not.
- Artwork is always an option as well.

STAFF ACTIVITY DURING SOLO TIME:

- Ideally, staff will take a parallel but “altered” solo themselves. Of course, conversation and physical proximity with colleagues are necessary. However, in the quiet of nature, noise carries, and the worst case scenario is that staff members consider it a social occasion or an opportunity to call all their friends on a cell phone... unmindful of the depth of their responsibility. At any point, a camper may walk into Leader Camp or whistle for help. Obviously, with youth, modeling “do as I do” is more influential than “do as I say.”
- A misstep may endanger the future of the solo program, as it is probably not as widely understood, well established, or even experienced by parents as some of the more traditional programs such as swimming and hiking.
- A unique consideration for staffing an overnight solo is that at least one person is a relatively light sleeper OR take turns keeping “watch.” A pair of heavy or exhausted sleepers could miss something!
- Depending on age, trust level, experience of the soloists, staff needs to remain alert and even check out the soloists without being seen or heard, just to assure that all is well. Campers may be particularly vulnerable to fears just before dark, just after dark and early in the morning. Sleeping and waking alone can be disconcerting. If for instance, a camper is heard crying,

make a personal visit without startling them. If in doubt, check it out!

- Safety considerations cannot be overstated...AND are not meant to discourage camp groups from establishing a solo program. Forewarned is forearmed and being prepared in all ways is essential.

STAFF - RETURN FROM SOLOS:

- Before “pick up” time, prepare food and drink for the returning soloists. To the hungry stomach, light and fresh food is preferable to heavy or overly sweet. Set a slow pace to prevent upset stomach as a result of gorging.
- During the meal and the debrief, it is important to keep the group together and not fragment. Everyone has important things to say and it benefits all to hear and share them.

POST SOLO DEBRIEF:

Sit together. A circle is inclusive. Let people talk and let the conversation flow, each taking turns talking about various themes or subjects. Return later to topics not completely explored. If appropriate, check in about any (probably not ALL) of the following:

Ask...

- How are you?
- What was the hardest part? Are you glad it's over? Why?
- Or do you wish your solo were longer? Why?
- What, if anything was easy?
- Or, easier than you thought? Were there any surprises? What?
- What, if anything, did you miss during your solo? Are there things or people in your life you take for granted?
- What will you remember the most? Tell others about?
- What do you want to “take with you” to apply to your life?
- How are you different from when your solo began?
- What was your experience around being hungry? What did you do instead of eat?
- What would you do differently if you participated in another solo?
- Would you solo again? Why or why not?

Inquire...did anyone break solo?

- Did you learn anything from not following the guidelines? What?
- How do others feel about breaking solo?
- If you broke solo and visited with another soloist, was the decision mutual? How did you arrive at that decision?

Invite...sharing from journals, such as writing or drawing

At some point, it may be appropriate for the leaders to share an experience, insight, story that would benefit or interest the group.

Recite or read...

- A poem or quote that provides closure to the experience
- Sing...
- A camp song that the entire group knows that illustrates the theme of the solo, for instance... nature, friendship, self-discovery, or silence.
 - Friendship circles are a traditional ending for many camp experiences.

Make...(if time and desire exists)

- A monkey's fist to be worn, a sand candle, a friendship bracelet, or some other simple memento that celebrates the solo experience and can serve as a tangible reinforcement.

Note...that for some campers, moving back to the full speed ahead camp environment may be challenging, after the quite alone time.

Other campers may be curious and want to know what happened and ask many questions. Assure the soloists that it's all right not to share anything they don't wish to, but to encourage those who are interested to go on a solo, and find out for themselves.

AFTER THE SOLO:

Be prepared for exaggerated stories and possible high drama around any bad weather, wild animal or other anxiety producing incidents. Groups often bond through shared adversity, even children. For instance, spiders can become monsters and coyote calls are from wild hyenas! It may have rained the ENTIRE time and the wind was strong as a tornado! A single tick on the arm translates as "covered with blood sucking insects!" Have fun with the stories, and help campers maintain a realistic perspective in the end. Privately, double check immediately any stories about "visitors," or rumors of camper

escapades. Youthful soloists have shared the following paraphrased responses in their debriefs:

In summary:

Experiences valued by adults may be equally valuable for youth, but are generally altered to fit the age, and the psychological and physical state of readiness of the younger participant. For instance, the all American game of baseball has been redesigned or adapted for youth. A young player, unfamiliar with baseball may begin by playing T-ball or Little League, where basic ball skills and teaming attitudes are developed. Caring adults, often parents, provide physical safety and game structure. Depending upon interest, ability, and the availability of good coaching, youth may continue to play ball well into adulthood. Players are consciously “led” into continually more challenging opportunities as they meet success and have positive experiences.

The solo experience for youth runs parallel. A camper, unfamiliar with the concept of spending time along in nature is introduced to a “mini-solo” that has been altered from the original solo concept appropriate for older participants. Caring camp staff, usually young adults, provides physical safety and a structure for time alone in nature.

No matter that for youth on solo, staff is nearby, within an earshot of a whistle. Optional note cairns provide an extra measure of security, for both the participant and the staff. The youth solo is may serve as an initial step on the journey toward longer and more rigorous experiences, and a lifetime appreciation of time alone in nature.

The following poem by Hugh Prather illustrates a value for solo at any age:

It's this simple:
If I never try anything,
I never learn anything.
If I never take a risk,
I stay where I am.
If I go ahead and do it,
It affects how much I continue
wanting to do it.

When I hold myself back,
I trade appearances for
The opportunity to find out

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