

The Unique Power of Camp:

What's the Big Deal about a Camp Experience?

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My wife Donna and I are the parents of two campers. They have both attended day camps and resident camps and both are now camp staff members. Like many parents who have learned the power of the camp experience, we give considerable credit to the camps our children have attended for the positive and lasting changes that have taken place in our kids.

But here's the question: What makes camp so different from other experiences for youth? What is it about camp that gives it a unique, "can't really get this anywhere else" kind of effect? People who have attended or worked at a camp know that it is a very "special" place. But what exactly *happens* at camp that makes it an essential youth development experience? Here are five of what I believe are the most important factors that make camp different:

One *Camp leads the way in using the best methods to help children learn & grow*

Camp is a lot more than "something fun for the kids to do when they are out of school." Actually, camps are outstanding places for children to learn and grow. Why? For almost 150 years, camps have been the leader in using the number one key secret to teaching: children learn most from *doing*. They learn most from hands-on discovery and practice, especially in small groups. The fancy name for this is "experiential" learning. When children are actively involved in high-participation activities, they not only learn much more, but their levels of attention, enjoyment, and motivation really blast off.

In fact, camp is such a terrific community for learning that schools are now following the lead of camps as they look for ways to reach students. Parents have surely noticed that their children are spending much more time in school now working with "manipulatives" (hands-on materials to learn concepts) and "real-world" situations. Kids do stuff like that at camp every five minutes.

Two *Camp communities remove the typical pressures from school and support children in a positive atmosphere that cherishes effort and persistence*

One fast way to explain the incredible power of camping is in two words: "no grades." It is amazing how children blossom when the burdens of constant evaluation and a "permanent record" are taken off their backs. Achievement is rewarded at camp just like it is at school. But what makes camp a special community is its focus on celebrating effort. It provides recognition when children try their best even if they don't succeed right away. In this less pressured atmosphere, children learn more readily what positive things to say and do when they make mistakes or face challenges. At camp, children learn to be persistent and positive. These values build stronger children.

Three *Camp has distinctive value in preparing children for future success*

How do we prepare children for life in a modern world? Key current buzzwords in the workplace are "teamwork" and "greater responsibility for independent problem-solving." There are higher expectations for employees to get along with others and to think for themselves. Again, camp has been leading the way by creating communities where kids make daily decisions about activities. They are put into situations every hour where how they act and meet their responsibilities will affect everyone else in their groups.

It's important to teach our children to get along with others, especially in an increasingly diverse world. Camps make a unique contribution here. Camps are communities where children are put into groups with many children that they may not know. This is often not true at school, for example, where children may move from grade to grade with many children from prior classes who may live on the very same block or not much farther. Campers may have a special friend or two in their group, but at most camps the group assignments encourage building new relationships and provide lots of practice in cooperation and compromise.

Four

Camp offers an unequalled variety of opportunities to develop well-rounded children

Camps cut like a laser through the negative expectations and beliefs that can stick to children and hold them back.

Each year of a child's life, he or she collects more "I can't's" than "I can's." It is, I believe, a tragedy that children often "decide" what they are "good at" and "not good at" when they are very young. These early, limiting self-assessments may last through adulthood. When children get more recognition for abilities in, for example, math and athletics than they get for reading and music, then their choice of future activities and how they spend their time will naturally tend to gravitate toward areas in which they have had the greatest success in the past. This is why many of us as college students took some interesting classes "pass/fail" — we wanted to learn without worrying about getting a bad grade and ruining our "record."

Like most parents, I want my children to be "well-rounded." One of the big reasons my wife and I have sent our children to camps is because they encourage "dabbling." Children can participate in, learn about, and enjoy a wide variety of activities without any need to be an expert in all of them. Camps offer a fantastic variety of different opportunities throughout every day. I cannot identify any other institution that comes even close to the range of recreational, dramatic, musical, artistic, environmental, and other interest areas that are offered to boys and girls at camp.

Five

Camp combats youth isolation by offering positive and accepting communities

There has been a lot of recent media attention about the isolation of many young people. Camp is about belonging — belonging to a group that respects and values each member. The traditions and customs of each different camp are like a secret code that allows those who know it to feel embraced by something unique and very special. Adult camp alumni often return many years later to camp still thrilled by the "inside knowledge" of camp legends and rituals that continue to inspire loyalty and a sense of connection.

Camp is, at its core, about learning how to make positive connections. The directors and staff of camps work hard to create a community that is enormously positive and accepting. Campers are urged to include, not exclude, others. They are praised for choosing new partners and not always the same ones. They are encouraged to respect the differences between people. In an increasingly sarcastic, put-down-oriented world, camps aim to be an oasis of personal safety where demeaning comments and disrespectful behavior are not tolerated and children are taught responsible and positive ways to resolve conflicts.

As an educator, I've been working with youth and the professionals who lead and teach them for over 25 years. I can tell you that of all the things that we give our children as parents, one of the most important is to send them to camp. Camp has a distinctive power to help them become their very best.

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