

What Research Tell Us About The Benefits Of Summer Camp

By Dr. Stephen Fine

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Two thousand and seven commemorates the 75th anniversary of the Ontario Camping Association (OCA). The OCA is the provincially recognized provider of quality camp experiences. They prescribe the operational standards for accredited camps and also provide ongoing education in the areas of camp practices, health issues, staff training and facilities management.

The collective goal of the OCA is the development of youth through safe and engaging programs. Accredited summer camps offer a variety of teaching and learning opportunities distinctive in their physical and social settings. The benefits of camp experiences for personal growth, socialization, physical fitness, and moral and ethical awareness, are well recognized by parent/guardians, educators, health professionals and clergy.

Packing off to camp each summer is a time honoured tradition. An Ipsos-Reid study in 2001 indicated that 52% of adult Ontarians attended day or residential camp as children. Those who did not attend camp themselves along with newcomers to Canada should be made aware of the potential benefits an OCA camp can offer to their children.

The majority of Ontarians live in communities that are predominately urban in character. Natural outdoor areas once a haven for youthful exploration and play are increasingly inaccessible and considered by many to be unsafe. Additionally, the desire to venture outdoors is often superceded by the draw of sedentary indoor activities that do not have the capacity to renew either physically or emotionally.

Current research into summer camps confirms that camp experiences provide numerous opportunities for the development of youth.

Here is a list of some benefits that OCA camps can delivery to kids:

Health and Wellbeing: Youth fitness studies show a disquieting increase in inactivity, eating disorders, and related health conditions. Corresponding health and quality of life camp studies indicate that the



vigorous outdoor activity, social interaction and balanced diet at camp can greatly improve a young person's overall wellbeing and establish healthy life-style patterns.

Self-Esteem: Feeling good about one's self, comes from tangible accomplishments rather than empty compliments. The diversity of camp programming allows for kids of all abilities to achieve personal bests along with peer acknowledgement. The opportunity exists for everyone to try new skills through age appropriate activities in a low-stress, spirited, outdoor environment.

Independence: Individual achievements experienced at a day or residence camp can help build a young person's sense of autonomy. Homesickness is a common and normal first response to a new environment away from what is familiar. Group self-sufficiency through peer support in a caring environment quickly allows the individual camper to overcome perceived needs for constant parental dependency.

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Leadership: Leadership is developed by giving young people responsibilities at camp that may not be expected of them elsewhere. For example, campers are responsible for keeping the camp and personal space neat and clean. They learn to take care of and value camp equipment. Older campers assist younger campers and in so doing develop greater self-control. All of these practical applications lead in time to an understanding of leadership and research findings indicate that these skills transfer successfully to home, school and community.

Friendship Skills: Making friends is about the easiest thing to do at camp. More than anything friendships are what makes camp experience so unforgettable. It takes courage to go to camp by yourself but that feeling of aloneness ends at the moment of arrival. The relationships formed at camp transcend stereotypes. The friendly behaviour exhibited at camp has also been recorded as extending beyond the camp setting.

Adventure and Exploration: Magnificent landscapes, exciting activities, and taking healthy risks in a controlled environment allows a safe yet challenging outlet for the natural human instinct to explore. Research indicates that camp encourages young people to try new things and step out of their ordinary routines.

Environmental Awareness: Fostering respect for the nature world is of paramount importance at most camps. Additionally, recycling and composting is an effective and responsible way of dealing with the by-products of human consumption and campers are exposed or directly involved in these practices while at camp. Research notes that parents reported an increase in their children's environmental awareness after camp.

Values and Decisions: Camp directors and camp staff all work towards the development of positive values and overall strength of character within campers. There is little evidence to indicate any immediate changes in understandings towards core values, consequences attached to personal choice or decision-making as a direct result of

attending camp. However, research conducted with camp alumni in later life has indicated that camp experiences figure prominently in the long-term as the basis underlying successful networking, ethical conduct, and positive parenting.

Spirituality: In some ways all camps have a spiritual component regardless of religious affiliation. This is due in part to communal living in natural settings that can often influence personal reflections on self, nature of being and the universe. There are camps with specific spiritual missions and camps without any religious overtones whatsoever. Research findings in this area can not be generalized as they reflect individual beliefs or mission of the individual camp. Statistics indicate that campers showed an increase in spirituality while at camp and that parents reported this growth was maintained.

Learning as a continuous process is the understanding currently being reinforced in the minds of our youth. Additionally, learning settings beyond the classroom are

beginning to be seen as valuable adjuncts to traditional modes of teaching. Realistically, considerable barriers exist with regard to accessibility and facilities beyond the classroom due to short-falls in public education funding. However, if the concept of life-long learning is to be successfully engendered in young minds then alternate learning settings must also become part of a comprehensive education. In this regard summer camp can tap into the learning possibilities inherent to children's individual intelligences and their intrinsic love for natural environments. Combined with the diverse social, cultural and ethnic mix of communal life at camp, Ontario Camping Association camps are clearly the sensible preference for any discerning parent or guardian.

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