



## **Psychological Benefits of Summer Camp**

Much has been written lately about the developmental problems of youth. Books such as “Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys” discuss how our culture's dominant masculine stereotypes shortchange boys and lead them toward emotional isolation. “Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls” describes a “girl-poisoning” culture that ultimately destroys girls’ self-esteem.

Authors of these and similar books offer some prescriptions for helping boys and girls cope. Fortunately, according to the American Camp Association<sup>®</sup> (ACA), Northern California, one of the best prescriptions is also one of the most enjoyable – summer camp.

Increasingly child development professionals acknowledge that camp helps kids mature socially, emotionally, intellectually, morally and physically.

Camp is an element in a child’s total development and it complements the academic skills that are learned in school with experientially based life skills. “Camp is one of the few institutions where young people can experience and satisfy their need for physical activity, creative expression and true participation in a community environment,” said Peter Scales, Ph.D. a senior fellow with the Search Institute in Minneapolis and noted educator, author and psychologist. “Most schools don't satisfy all these needs. Kids who have had these kinds of (camp) experiences end up being healthier and have fewer problems,” he added

Camp helps young people discover and explore their talents, interests and values. At camp, children learn to problem-solve, adjust to new and different people, learn responsibility, gain new skills and increase their self-esteem. An independent research firm, Philliber Research Associates, conducted the largest study of camper outcomes in the United States. The research found that 96 percent of children said that camp helped them make new friends and 92 percent of children found that the people at camp helped them feel good about themselves.

“The building blocks of self-esteem are belonging, learning and contributing,” explained Michael Popkin, Ph.D., family therapist and founder of Active Parenting. “Camps offer unique opportunities for children to succeed in these three vital areas.”

## **Camp Provides a Community for Children**

One major advantage of camp is that it is different from the rest of the kids’ world. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, former chair of America’s Promise – The Alliance for Youth, said: “(Camp) gets them away from a neighborhood or situation that may exist in their neighborhoods that isn't healthy...It teaches them how to get along with other people – both other

young people as well as adults. To give our children a safe place to learn and grow – camp does that.”

In this new environment, children have the opportunity to belong to their own community, an experience that can help kids become cooperating, contributing and caring citizens. Camp activities and group living in a natural environment create communities that provide for successful, healthy development in a fun environment.

“Each summer a camp community is constructed that allows participants to get in touch with a sense of life that is larger than themselves,” explained Bruce Muchnick, licensed clinical social worker specializing in child and adolescent treatment. “The camp community seeks to satisfy children’s basic needs for connectedness, affiliation, belonging, acceptance, safety and appreciation.”

In this structured environment, children interact with positive role models who have the time to listen, talk, relax and reflect. They learn to work together, make choices, try new things, build independence, increase self-reliance and gain confidence. All are necessary steps on a child’s path to a healthy, productive life.

“What makes camp a special community is its focus on celebrating effort,” said Michael Brandwein, noted speaker and consultant to the camp profession. “In this less pressured atmosphere, children learn more readily what positive things to say and do when they make mistakes and face challenges

“Campers are urged to include, not exclude, others,” he continued. “They are praised for choosing new partners. They are encouraged to respect the differences between people. In an increasingly sarcastic, put-down-oriented world, camp aims 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.”

In short, camp can help kids overcome many of the negative elements of their “Cain” and “Ophelia” environments. Instead the camp experience provides a place where kids can learn in an atmosphere of a caring community.

This experience can have a long-lasting, even permanent effect on their lives. As Bob Ditter, licensed clinical social worker specializing in child and adolescent treatment, said: “In this community children gain self-esteem with humility, overcome their inflated sense of self, and develop a lifelong sense of grace and wonder.”

### **The American Camp Association**

ACA is the only organization that accredits all types of camps. ACA accreditation means that your child’s camp cares enough to undergo a thorough (more than 300 health and safety standards) review of its operation — from staff qualifications and training to emergency management. Accreditation is voluntary, and while many good camps are not accredited, ACA

accreditation assures families that camps have made the commitment to a safe, nurturing environment for their children.