



Kids Unplugged

Electronic technology has done a lot to make life more convenient, but these gadgets easily blur the lines between work, play and family time.

Certainly, television programs, DVD movies, Internet sites and video games are entertaining and often educational. However, they often involve unsavory content and can definitely absorb incredible amounts of time. Research last year by the Kaiser Foundation found that young people between 8 and 18 spend an average of 6.5 hours a day absorbed in media. Most of it is electronic and much of the time is solitary.

Fortunately, children can be unplugged and experience a different kind of life – at summer camp.

How can camp help? Several ways, according to the American Camp Association® (ACA), Northern California. Here are some of the most important.

Camp is a community, not a solitary experience.

In the past, kids had many opportunities to develop natural, day-after-day relationships with other children. These days, a lot of children don't have that chance.

One major advantage of camp is that it is different from the rest of the kids' world, and that it is, by its nature, a community experience that encourages making friends.

Indeed, for most children, it's the friends – not the facilities or activities – that make any experience unforgettable. The relationships that children form at camp can help erode stereotypes, build trust and respect, and push them to be better people themselves. Ideally, camps create a culture where friendships blossom in the absence of cliques, bullies and materialism.

Campers experience a community where everyone is welcome.

Campers are urged to include, not exclude, others. They are praised for choosing new partners and encouraged to respect the differences between people. Camps intentionally work to create cultures devoid of the negative social pressures prevalent in other settings.

At camp, children enhance their relationships with adults and other kids. Campers are exposed to kids from outside their neighborhood or school. A week or so of sharing living quarters and confidences with different kinds of people helps children develop a greater appreciation for diversity, and helps them learn to get along with others who don't share their opinions.

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.

Camp exposes kids to a different kind of environment.

Most camps enhance environmental awareness. Many have at least some outdoor activities, often in a beautiful natural environment. Some camps foster environmental awareness formally, through nature programs, conservation activities or the like. Others are more subtle, discouraging campers from pulling leaves off trees, teaching them to identify poison oak, or having them participate in routine recycling. All these experiences give young people the opportunity to connect to the earth in a meaningful way.

Kids are active at camp.

By definition, camp includes some physical activity, which is tremendously important at a time when it's estimated that one-third of U.S. children are overweight. At camp, kids get the opportunity to “get physical” in a positive way, participating in healthy activities that contribute to the growth of healthy habits.

Many camp activities involve teams, helping kids develop teamwork and camaraderie. Other activities are individual, such as hiking, horseback riding and swimming. Whatever the activity, camp gives children the opportunity to improve their skills in a supportive environment. They can take this new expertise with them and participate in the activity on their own.

Camp exposes kids to new kinds of activities.

Today, many children have fewer opportunities to be involved in activities. Within the past decade, a range of extracurricular and summer programs that made memories – and provided important social and academic skills – have been eliminated or cut back.

Camp helps fill that void. After all, camp is meant to be fun and the activities are certainly a major factor in making camp a pleasant experience. At camp, kids play to learn. In addition to the traditional activities of hiking, swimming and crafts, different camps offer specialized activities to meet virtually any interest, from music and gymnastics to computers and foreign languages.

Camp gives kids the opportunity to sample activities they wouldn't ordinarily try. Most kids are more willing to try new things in the socially protected camp environment, which celebrates effort and where they can sample an activity or sport without a major commitment. Because the children are often with a different group than their usual friends, less “stigma” is involved as they learn new skills.

Another benefit: camp shows kids they can have a good time without being entertained, something that is particularly important today when so many kids have lost the art of playing.

Kids improve their self-esteem at camp.

It stands to reason that some kids might become more and more engrossed in video games and other solitary activities because of poor self-esteem. If they don't feel good about themselves, chances are they will retreat more and more to themselves.

Fortunately, one of the major benefits of summer camp is improved self-esteem, which comes partially from trying new things and learning new skills.

Self-esteem does not come from empty praise, but from feeling competent, from having successful experiences, and from making genuine contributions. When kids increase competency, they feel better about themselves and this carries over to other aspects of their lives.

Camp helps kids bond with parents in a new way.

It's also healthy for children and parents to spend some planned time apart and talk about their experiences afterwards. The artificial need created by electronic technologies – to see and hear everything the instant it happens – is not always developmentally appropriate for children. Children are exposed to electronic technology all year. It's nice for them to have a break during the summer.

In fact, camps were originally conceived as the ideal platform for face-to-face, real-time conversations between children and other human beings. This kind of connection is so precious and rewarding, it may be what you and your children remember best about camp.

Resources are available to help select the “right” camp.

Of course, the first step to gaining these advantages of camp is to select the right camp for your child.

The next step in choosing a camp is to research your options. A great place to start is the ACA's searchable database of ACA-Accredited® camps in California. To find an ACA-Accredited camp and to access other resources, visit <http://www.ACAnorcal.org>, phone 916-333-5344 or e-mail info@acanorcal.org. For more information about summer camps in general, visit <http://www.CampParent.org> and <http://www.ACAcamps.org>.

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.