

Why the World Needs Summer Camp

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It is not easy for parents to make the decision to send their child away into the waiting arms of strangers who promise to take care of them — people who promise to show them the wonders of nature, fun, new skills, and friendships. As a parent of two children, even I struggle with the idea, and I have been around summer camps my entire life.

The world needs the next generation to be more tolerant of each other's views, ideology, and beliefs. Summer camp is an opportunity for children to be exposed to the best of human character. Carefully selected role models are dedicated to showing your child how to have fun, learn from others, and make friends in person rather than online. Camp allows kids to meet people from all over the world, every race, culture, and socioeconomic level. I still remember one of my counselors, Danny, from England, explaining to me, "The world is full of excuses. It doesn't matter where you came from or what has happened to you. At the end of the day you choose how you treat others."

There is something magical about a summer camp experience. Each and every camp in the world is different. Not merely because of geography or location, but because of the traditions and people who have touched the camp. Every camp has hidden treasures of history and traditions that give it character and identity. Even with agency camps like the YMCA where there is a common mission, every camp is unique in its style, program, games, geography, traditions, and experience.

Every staff member, alumni camper, and volunteer has memories associated with their time at their camp — memories that stay with them for their lifetime. Most people remember with fondness the counselors, cabins, camp food, camp outs, and special happenings of their time.

Camp is an independent experience that shapes one's character and life — a controlled, safe environment where children and youth are able to make their own decisions about simple things (what activity they want to do, how many s'mores they want to make, or what clothes they are going to wear) and about important things (who they will hang out with . . . who will be their friends).

Camp is a place where kids interact with people face-to-face and, at the same time, learn about themselves and others around a camp fire, under the stars, or sitting around a dining hall table.

Camp allows the idea of boarding the train to Hogwarts to go from fantasy to reality — children find a world filled with possibilities unavailable to them in everyday life.

Camps give kids a chance to practice being the best they can be. They experience a place designed to create happy memories and encourage self-expression. They have the opportunity to climb towers, ride horses, shoot an arrow, and even experience the success of winning the big game! It stays with them forever. Kids will learn from a full range of emotions and human experiences including homesickness, friendship, disagreements, teamwork, frustrations, jubilant success, and more.

As parents, our hopes and jobs are to ready our kids to be productive, independent, and capable people — to prepare them to thrive without us. Camp offers a way for kids to start developing those skills in the best possible environment. It makes me a bit sad every time my son runs off to join his cabin group without even a look back . . . and at the same time, I burst with pride watching him growing into a happy, independent, tolerant, open, confident, and capable person. I know that we will have plenty to talk about when he gets home from camp. I also know he will remember the trust and gift of his time at camp, and it will add to him for the rest of his life.

There is so much competition for our children's time in the summer — sports practices, summer school, well-deserved vacations. But let's not forget the value of a camp experience — camp is a gift we can give our children that they will benefit from and remember forever. If ever there was a time when the world needed a generation of future leaders who understood the intricacies of living in a community, having tolerance, and being open — that time is now.

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