

Then and Now: Why Summer Camp Is More Important Than Ever Before

February 11, 2019
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Our children are growing up *so much* differently than we did, with so much of their lives spent staring at and touching glowing screens. I looked for information in my encyclopedia, dictionary, or local library, while kids can find a fact through their fingertips in seconds. But while we are more connected to everything and everybody through technology, we are far less connected to each other on a personal level than ever before.

For thousands and thousands of years we made friends organically, until about 15 years ago, when we began meeting people through MySpace, then Facebook, Instagram, video game headsets, etc. We used to be able to get from one place to another without a glowing screen directing us. We used to play outside after school, and all day on the weekends and all summer — and now most neighborhoods look like outdoor ghost towns. Where are the children? Oh, we know where most of them are . . . staring at their glowing screens.

Don't get me wrong. I love IMDB, YouTube, the Red Zone channel, and seeing my high school friends' kids grow up, but there is no doubt amongst layman and experts that *we as a human race are quickly losing our social relationship skills simply because we aren't using them much with much frequency anymore*. You don't use it, you lose it. And with our kids, if you never do it, you never learn it.

Not Their Fault — Ours

I was at an NFL tailgate party recently — one of the last bastions of old-school socializing — watching a 10-year-old boy mercilessly beg his parents for his iPad, and then proceed to sit in the car for an hour playing games on it. Not his fault — his parents enabled the behavior. When 23 percent of *babies* have TVs in their rooms, and 25 percent of kids under age six own a smartphone-type device with internet access, how can we be surprised that this is what so many children have become (Page, Cooper, Griew, Jago 2010)? Research shows that screen time in young children is leading to increased inattention, anxiety, and depression (Journal of Educational Psychology, 2010). Just like too much sugar suppresses the immune system, too much screen time is suppressing our kids' brain development.

Eight- to 18-year-olds consume an average of more than seven hours of screen media per day, often while multi-tasking, a statistic that has increased two-and-a-half hours in the past ten years. Their excessive screen time is now being linked to increased hyperactivity, emotional and behavior problems, and difficulty with peers and school. Sign of the times, or lazy parenting? A 2010 Kaiser Foundation study found that eight out of ten parents *do not* monitor their children's screen time. Parents come home after long days of work and don't want to spend the precious little time they have arguing with their kids to put away their devices. Weekends and summers, the majority of a child's waking hours can be spent staring at glowing screens.

If technology is a drug, we the parents are the dealers. The research company “dscout” put a tracker on phones and found the average adult touching, swiping, or clicking their phone 2,617 times per day. The top 10 percent had more than 5,000 per day. We are living in a state of what researchers describe as “**continuous partial attention**,” as humans (no matter what they tell you) are simply unable to pay full attention to any one thing when the phone is within reach. We all need to put our phones away and give our kids (and our life) our full attention.

“I Just Want My Kids to Be Happy”

One last bit of research: a multi-year study of 50,000 high schoolers led by noted author/researcher Jean Twenge, showed unequivocally that the happiest kids use screens less than an hour per day, and that teens who spend more time in face-to-face, in-person interaction with friends are happiest. We all want our kids to be happy, right? Well there is actually an inverse relationship between happiness and time spent on screens for your children. We need to have the discipline and commitment to do what is best for our kids in the long run. So how and where can we distract our kids from their screens while giving them the best opportunities to grow into good people and contributing members of society? *Two words: summer camp.*

Summer Camp

Traditional, outdoor, hot, sweaty, buggy, muddy, summer camp. Because, simply put, camp is the antidote to the traps of modern society. Camp is like a vitamin supplement of the vital things our kids’ lives are missing: Face to face interactions, collaborating together in groups, and navigating the ups and downs of relationships. It’s also a place where kind, caring people other than parents help teach them the skills of life like making friendships, using integrity, self-regulation and independence. At my camp it’s simple: Electronics are strictly forbidden. While at first the kids (and staff) may complain, in the end they literally thank us. They cry tears of joy as they hug their friends and counselors on their last day of camp, eager to return next summer to their magical utopia where they can be their authentic self, and not a social media avatar jonesing for their next Instagram Snapchat dopamine hit.

The Good News

In the 25 years that I’ve been running summer camps, I am absolutely seeing the pendulum swinging back to a sense of normalcy with today’s younger parents. The last generation was overwhelmed by the onset of Internet technology, combined with the “everyone gets a trophy” mentality, and keeping our precious offspring air conditioned and sheltered from challenges. Fast forward to today, and young parents see the mistakes of the past, work with incorrigible 20-somethings, and want no part of it for their children. They want their kids outdoors, tolerating frustrations, conquering challenges, meeting new people, and empathetically working with others.

The new generation is also less interested in money/materialism, and more about gaining new experiences, and being good people — two things that good camps specialize in. Every year, foreign parents sending tens of thousands of their kids overseas to hundreds of American summer camps- they understand the value of camp. Savvy city people get it, bussing their kids to suburban day camps and sleepaway camps in droves like never before. Yet McMansion suburbanite parents who never went to camp themselves are slow to take the leap. Look at the stats — look at your kids! Summer camp is

more important than ever before, filling the societal gap left by schools focused on testing, busy parents, and glowing screens!

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Resources:

- *Screen time (8-18) - Rideout, V. J., Foehr, U. G., & Roberts, D. F. (2010). Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2.*
- *(increased issues with screentime) – (Page, Cooper, Griew, Jago 2010). Children’s screen viewing is related to psychological difficulties irrespective of physical activity. Pediatrics, 126(5), 1011-1017.*
- *Parents not reading to kids- (De Jong & Bus 2002). Quality of book-reading matters for emergent readers: emergent readers: An experiment with the same book in regular or electronic format. Journal of Educational Psychology, 94(1), 145-155.*
- *Dr. Joshua Straub- Disturbing Screen Time statistics parents should know about.*
- *Study Finds, 4/21/18- Shock Study*
- *dscout- 6/16/16- Putting a finger on phone obsession*
- *Monitoring the Future study led by Jean Twenge- San Diego State & Georgia University, follows 50,000 high school kids per year*