

Youth Development at Summer Camp

By Dr. Stephen Fine, Published Convoke Magazine, January 2008 in English and Chinese

Why Should I Send My Children To Summer Camp?

Summer camps in Ontario have been providing quality programs for children and young people for over a century. But, the population and cultural diversity of Ontario has grown considerably over the last 100 years. The truth is that today many families are no longer familiar with the concept of summer camp or what camp programs have to offer their children. Discerning international parents will find that today's summer camps reflect the cultural diversity of Ontario in the 21st century. Camp is more than simply a fun and safe place for a summer holiday. Camp is a holistic learning environment that advances knowledge on the personal and social levels within the beauty and wonder of nature.

Over the years many international families have sent their children to our horseback riding camp in Ontario. Our campers come from all over Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Occasionally, I'm asked why parents send their children so far away from home. Often the reason is language immersion for non-English speakers but there are many other reasons as well.

The reasons are connected to the learning that takes place at camp; learning about self, community and the world around us through actual experience. Camp learning is different from learning at school because activities take place in settings associated to the subject



matter. For example: geology, biology, geography, ecology, astronomy, art, and music all become more engaging when delivered in the social and physical settings of camp.

Hands-on Inquiry-based Learning

Ontario camps boast magnificent natural settings that are highly valued by people from countries which have suffered loss and /or pollution of their forests, lakes and rivers systems. Immersion into a natural environment allows children to receive hands-on education that stimulates their natural curiosity. For example school science and geography curriculums examine sustainable practices. This area of study can be challenging for children when their experience is limited only to urban environments and planned communities. Camp settings offer children a connection to the natural world that motivates learning and interest. This is something that cannot be achieved solely in the classroom.

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Additionally, many camps provide programs that incorporate math, science and technology along with traditional outdoor summer camp activities. In 2005 the American Institute for Research released the findings of a study on teaching and learning in residential outdoor settings. Findings indicated that students showed significant gains in self-esteem, relationships with peers, problem solving, and motivation to learn. They also achieved increased academic scores on science studies which were included in the program.

Positive Social Development

The development of strong social skills, confidence among peers and independence flourish in the camp setting. Living and working together with your peers, achieving personal goals and sharing responsibilities can transform a shy and cautious child into a positive and self-assured one, often within a very short time. Residential camps in particular encourage children to interact with one another on a level that cannot be duplicated in a school setting.

Language Immersion

It is well known that the best way to learn a language is to live within its native culture. Language is unique not only in its spoken and written aspects but also in associated body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions. In order to truly learn another language you must also learn its culture. School offers the



language basics such as grammar, spelling, and pronunciation, but the social and cultural aspects of language are best learned through real-life circumstances.

Additionally, brain studies show that children process language understanding more effectively when accompanied by visual stimulation. For example, Laura is a Canadian English speaking 13 year old and Cindy is a Chinese Mandarin speaking 13 year old. Laura and Cindy are in a cabin together, where the language associated to the daily routine and activities at camp are reinforced by repetition. Laura and Cindy are “stable buddies”. When it’s their turn to feed the horses the girls walk to the stables together. Laura says to Cindy, “Cindy, will you walk to the stables with me?” At first Cindy may not understand but Laura will use body language and hand motions to assist in relaying the message. Done on a frequent basis, Cindy soon comes to understand the words for many of the daily routines of camp life.

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Summer Camp for International Students

Many parents from the international community who live outside of Canada choose one of the fine boarding schools available in Ontario for their children's education. Academic excellence and language immersion are popular reasons for attending Ontario schools. But the development of socialization skills and strong friendships has proven equally important for successful integration into Canadian university life for any young person.

The first year of enrollment for an international student is always a period of adjustment that can be socially and culturally challenging. A summer camp experience prior to attending a new school in Ontario is an ideal way to become accustomed to Canadian life-style and build a strong friendship base. Camp is also a great way to end off the school year for those international students already attending a boarding school in Ontario before returning home for their summer vacation.

Opportunity for Youth Development

Each and every year families from many different cultures are choosing Ontario as their home. Summer camp represents an element of Canadian youth culture that is wholesome, healthy, fun and educative. With 300 accredited

Ontario Camping Association camps throughout the province there is a



quality camp that will appeal to everyone. Summer camp is something that should be experienced and enjoyed by the sons and daughters of Ontario's multi-cultural and international communities. As we often tell prospective parents; our campers come from around the world and around the corner. Consider an Ontario camp for your children this summer.