

Three Dads Reflect on Their Camp Days

By Dr. Stephen Fine

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Twenty-five years as a camp director and researcher has given me the opportunity to ask hundreds of former campers and camp counselors if they believe their camp experiences influenced their lives in any significant way. What I learned and validated through research is that camp experiences account for important life-shaping chapters in the lives of adults who are now parents themselves.

Camp is a place where meaningful relationships develop within a broad social and ethno-cultural community. The shared experience of camp life provides opportunities to make friends with kids from different places and different backgrounds. As well, many tell of personal challenges and credit their days at camp as a positive time in their lives that provided "...a foundation for understanding the world" and "...something to fall back on when the hard times come." Camp is a place where you can discover who you are, achieve personal bests, and have fun while doing it. I thought it would be of interest to relate some camp recollections from a father's perspective.

One former camp counselor dad is now a fire fighter. He says that what he learned at camp has successfully transferred to his present occupation. He describes camp as a place where people are playing and having fun, but in so doing they are also gaining practical skills, life skills, and personal skills:

"When you are a firefighter you're doing a stressful job and you have to live with a lot of different personalities. Everybody has to get along so it's really not that far from the camp cabin to the fire hall. You have a captain - like the camp director. You have a senior man - like the counselor - who has lots of experience and works with the crew - the campers! Then you have the kid who's been at camp five years in a row. He's the veteran - seen it, done it. And then you have the new kid. The new kid learns exactly the same as a new recruit. He is shown what to do by those more experienced; he quickly learns what his obligations are, what needs to be done, and what behaviour is expected. And the best thing is that camp is all a lot of fun."



Our next dad is someone who did not attend camp as a child and so his decision to take a counselor position 500 kilometers from home was a bit unsettling. For many children being away at camp can be initially worrisome but homesickness generally affects children only in the first days of camp. Our dad believes that the natural setting was in part responsible for allowing both him and his campers to relax and go with the flow. He recognizes an emotional connection to nature that is positive and energizing.

"All of a sudden you are living with six strangers in the woods. I remember some of the campers were coming from South America. It's amazing the different cultures you can bring into this environment. People are traveling from thousands of kilometers away to this remote place and then they are sort of tossed into a cabin with other youngsters. And it is amazing to see how quickly the relationships develop. Within minutes the kids are interacting with each other and then they're out and ready to take on the world. But in the cities nobody seems to want to talk to each other. You can be standing beside someone and nobody will say anything. But at camp the kids just naturally start to develop socially."

I would suggest that the speed and intensity with which these relationships form is linked to the social and physical setting of camp. At camp any initial feelings of being away from home moves

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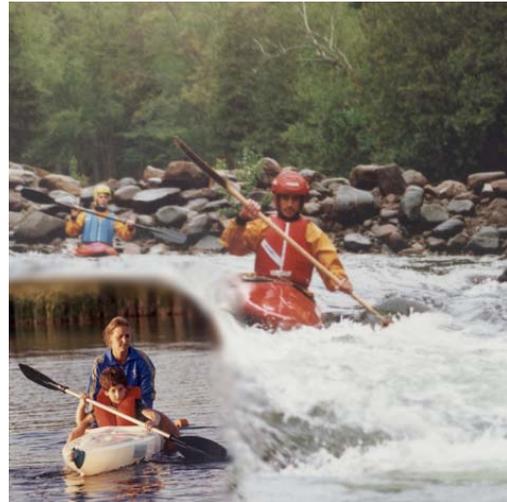
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quickly to a sense of autonomy that is shared and supported by cabin mates and counselors within the camaraderie of a common experience – the camp experience.

Our last dad spends most of his working days with computers. He attended camp as a child and was a counselor for three seasons. He describes the camp community as a team environment and he has strived to create team environments in his professional and personal relationships ever since.

“The community at camp was very much a team environment and I’ve tried, pretty well over the last fifteen years, to build those team environments wherever I go in the relationships with the people I work with. I am very much a positive person. I try to keep things up. It’s more enjoyable to work in a team environment than working against people.”

One of the camp lessons that stuck with this dad was that you had to depend on your mates to get jobs done around camp, cabin and certain activities. It often involved the older ones helping the younger ones. He now relates that this is what he has encouraged not only in the workplace but also within his own family.



The influence of an original experience and its significance to those who have been part of that experience becomes increasingly evident with the passage of time. So it is with our dads as they reflect on how their camp experiences have influenced their lives and the lives of their children. As the camp season approaches, I urge parents to consider camp as more than simply another summer time amusement. Camp does have the ability to shape young lives for the better. Our dads’ reflections are proof of that.