

Too Many Choices Can Dilute Camp Experience

By Dr. Stephen Fine

Published: City Parent Magazine February 2007

Traditionally children went to camp for a month or the entire summer. After pouring over brochures, getting references, or choosing where mom or dad had gone, a camp was selected. Kids would return summer after summer. This often led to a CIT position and eventually a job as a counsellor. The life-long friendships forged from such an experience, the sense of community and the feeling of belonging cannot be disputed.

However, as the 2007 camp season approaches we acknowledge that prospective camper families have changed dramatically. We live in a fast-paced, multicultural society where many parents know nothing about the benefits of accredited camps. Kids now have a wide array of summer options to choose from. Summer camp is no longer the only game in town. Many families have adopted a "smorgasbord" approach to this bewildering array of summertime options. As a result, one week programs are becoming very popular.

There was a time when a shorter option was offered as a try-out experience for very young or first time campers. This was comfortable for kids who had never been away from home and also for their parents. But it was considered a bridge to a longer program. The traditional wisdom being that camp was a summertime immersion, something that gave everyone in the family a break and a time of growth for kids away from the influences home life.

The trend today is to select a variety of camps which necessitates a shorter stay. Let's look at an example. Leila is 12 years old. She came to camp last summer for the first time and chose a one week stay because she didn't know anyone and wasn't sure she would like camp. She loved to ride horses and the program and facilities seemed a perfect match for her interests. When her parents picked her up, she told them she'd had a fantastic time and wanted to come back for at least two weeks next summer. She had so many great camp friends now and there was just so much more to do and learn.



But the next season Leila once again enrolled for a week. Her mother claimed that Leila had not stopped talking about camp all year and could hardly wait to come back. She effused about the wonderful program, fabulous staff and described Leila's camp experience as "important on many levels." However, this year Leila had some riding competitions which conflicted. She was also on the soccer team, so they were considering a week at "sports camp." And she wanted to attend an "arts camp" with her friend. So, with all this and going to her aunt's cottage as well, there was only one week left to attend the "riding camp."

I see this increasing attitude towards "camp grazing" as somewhat problematic. Children need to learn about making wise choices. A longer stay at camp would have given Leila the opportunity to develop her riding skills more fully. She would also have had the time to relax and have fun with the friends who had become so important to her. However, second time around everyone again opted for the preview when the feature presentation would have provided a much richer experience.

Another common reason for choosing a short stay at camp is concern that the camper will be homesick. Homesickness almost always passes quickly with the help of understanding counsellors, fellow cabin mates and exciting activities. What is strange and uncomfortable on day one becomes familiar and fun within a few days.

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Camp is a child's vacation. Parents should bear this in mind and look at how they feel when they are preparing to go on a cruise, ski trip, golf get away, or the in-laws cottage. First there is the hassle of packing, then the stress of getting there, and then the settling in period. Many adults will say things like, "It takes me two or three days to unwind," or "I like my own bed – I can't sleep until I get used to a different one."

A child going to camp will need time to settle in as well. The first few days are exciting but they can also be uncomfortable and the feeling of "I want to go home" is not uncommon. It is a typical human reaction to new surroundings and the interruption of familiar routines. So if you have chosen a one week program because of perceived homesickness issues I suggest this may not give your child enough time to "chill" and have a successful time.

Now multiply this pattern for each and every change in a kid's summertime agenda. The camper will have several first days to deal with, and several more settling in periods, and more importantly, multiple last days of saying goodbye to new friends. Considered from this perspective the stressors associated to "camp grazing" account for several unfulfilling or non-productive days – and these lost days become significant when the timeline is short to begin with.

Parents should carefully consider timeframes in conjunction with their children. What are the reasons for considering camp as a summer vacation option? Do all parties agree to make an honest commitment to the camp in question?



Can the appropriate time be allocated in order to allow for a quality camp experience? Appreciate that it is best if length of stay is not compromised by demanding schedules. Demanding schedules are for the most part linked to adult agendas and are a major source of anxiety and stress within the home. Time at summer camp is one of the few options that allow children to be childlike in a world removed from adult concerns and hectic schedules. Summer camps stand as one of the last bastions of community where young people can move through their days at a walking pace. This in itself is something that should be valued and savoured.