**What's the Magic of Camp?**

Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

Why are people so loyal to their sleep away camps? What exactly happens at camp that makes people rhapsodize about the experience thirty or forty years later? Whenever I tell people that I am curious about the camp experience, the stories start to pour out. “I loved my camp,” they say in a dreamy voice.

What is it about the summer camp experience — just a few weeks away for perhaps two or three seasons — that goes so deep under their skin? As a psychologist, I am curious about the mystery of camp. What’s the magic ingredient?

After a whole summer of sitting in on campfires, cabin chats, and dining hall sing-alongs; after laughing through a lot of silly campfire skits; after watching kids compete in color wars and canoeing contests and stage first-rate productions of Broadway musicals — I’m closer to an answer.

First, it is absolutely magical for kids to be away from their parents. The sweetest, most satisfying moments of childhood (think back to your own life) are almost always when you are away from your parents. Children are suddenly free to face challenges and accomplishments that are theirs alone — experiences that don’t have to be run through the parental cognitive-ruminative-metabolic-judicial machinery.

Secondly, the relationship between campers and counselors is pure gold. The younger kids love and admire the counselors, and that respect brings out the best in young adults. They are at their most responsible, compassionate, and loving when they are put in charge of younger children, and the younger children knock themselves out trying to impress these young demi-gods.

Finally, if camps are successful, they create a private world with its own rules and rituals and magic. Deep down, all children want to have their own adventures with no (apparent) safety net. Suburban life and school don’t provide children with much of an arena for adventure or their imaginations. Camps have the ability to create that world that belongs only to a child and his or her friends. Now that is magic.

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Adapted from “What’s the Magic of Camp?” originally published in the [September 2010 issue of](http://www.campparents.org/newsletter) [Camp e-News](http://www.campparents.org/newsletter%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). Michael Thompson, Ph.D., is the coauthor of Raising Cain. He is presently writing a book about camps and overnight school trips called Homesick and Happy and can be contacted at michaelthompson.phd@gmail.com.