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The Case for Camp — Why Kids Need It Now More Than Ever

By Peg Smith, CEO, American Camp Association

Change is a part of life. It is often directly related to survival and can enrich one's life in ways unexpected. Developmental years, especially childhood and young adulthood, are in essence a time of profound change and growth. It is exciting and disquieting at the same time. When it comes to our children and youth, we need to be sure that change is made for the better.

We've been so concentrated on the brain, we forget about the rest of our bodies. This change in focus has led to an obesity rate that is unacceptable. Our kids are not as healthy as the generation before. Families used to live in a community. We've lost that, keeping kids inside and losing a sense of neighborhood.

Add to that the fact that our kids stand to inherit all the economic, social, and environmental challenges we've created, and the legacy we have left our children and youth begins

to look bleak.

So, how do we prepare tomorrow's adults with the skills, and more importantly, the competencies they will need to tackle changes in our world? We could start with a positive camp experience. A quality camp experience provides our children and youth with the opportunity to learn powerful lessons in community, character-building, skill development, and healthy living — a meaningful, engaged, and participatory environment. Camp promotes community. It creates this great space that shows kids how to live together and care for one another. There are norms and negotiation of boundaries; there are rules. Camp is a place where everyone can "practice" growing up stretching their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive muscles outside the context of their immediate family. Camp teaches critical thinking. We need to remember how important it is to be

actively involved in the learning process, and camp affords that. We're going to need really strong problem solvers in the next century. We need the science, math, and biology, but without the ability to relate, connect, empathize, or inspire innovation, how will our children and youth be able to make a difference in the challenges now facing us?

The camp experience embraces the natural environment. While kids today have fewer and fewer opportunities to be outdoors, the camp experience advances the outdoor learning environment. As we become more concerned about saving the planet, we run out and make DVDs and videos about it. But the environment needs to be experienced to be appreciated. Kids need to catch tadpoles in the creek, wander among the trees, and feel the sun on their faces to understand the importance of those things. What hap-

pens to a generation that may grow up not seeing stars in the dark of the night? Camp creates future leaders. The camp experience offers kids a close-up look at compassionate leadership through the camp director, counselors, resident nutritionist, and other camp personnel. And kids get loads of opportunities to practice being a leader themselves — song leader, lunch table leader, team captain, the list goes on and on. Camp is an equal opportunity life changer. It addresses universal needs not specific to a particular racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group. Nobody is left out. It's all about development. Camp has a lasting impact. One of the greatest gifts you can give a child or young adult is a sense of success and achievement. Camp teaches kids how to be active participants, ask questions, ask for help, and try new things. They leave understanding that it's

okay to feel a little uncomfortable sometimes, because that's generally what happens when you're getting ready to learn something. The camp experience translates back in real-world experience — in an "I can" attitude. We need to advocate for our young people. We should promote opportunities for kids — give them camp experiences that serve as an antidote for the world's challenges. We need to recognize this is not a series of frivolous activities. We often think if it looks like fun it must be unimportant, but "fun" is a young person's "work" — to learn, to grow, to be productive, creative, and happy. If they don't do that work, they won't turn into healthy adults. Now more than ever, kids need camp. Visit www.CampParents.org to find out how you can change a life by helping make it possible for every child or young adult to have a camp experience.

By visiting ACA's family resource site, www.CampParents.org, families have access to information and guidance as they search for the perfect camp experience. ACA's New Find A Camp comprehensive database of camps and programs allows families to search based on region, activity, cultural focus, budget, session length, and much more! In addition, families can follow ACA on Facebook and Twitter for helpful hints and camp information.

How Can Families Begin Their Own Camp Experience?

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