



Year-Round Education Public Policy Position Updated June 2011

Position

The American Camp Association (ACA) believes the organized camp experience is a vital component in the development and education of the whole child. ACA supports year-round educational opportunities and actively supports the extension of organized camp experiences to all children. (*Position taken 2/22/03*)

Background

Issues concerning the quality of traditional education bring into question the assumption that learning occurs only during the school day for the nine months of the school year. Too often, the summer months and out-of-school settings are ignored in the national discussion about the education of children and youth. One thing is clear — learning takes place year-round when supported by challenging, stimulating, and positive experiences (Bridgall, 2005). In fact, year-round educational opportunities, such as summer learning programs, camps, and outdoor education programs, can augment classroom-based learning.

Engagement in positive out-of-school activities has been found to predict academic success, such as higher test scores, lower absenteeism, lower dropout rates, higher homework completion rates, and higher grades (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). Greater involvement in extracurricular activities is associated with better academic adjustment and psychological competencies and a positive peer context (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Programs that seek to enhance the personal social skills of youth demonstrate significant increases in youths' self-perceptions and bonding to school, positive social behaviors, school grades and levels of academic achievement, and significant reductions in problem behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010).

High-quality, structured, out-of-school activities are environments that have the potential to support and promote youth development because they offer youth safe environments; prevent youth from engaging in delinquent activities; teach youth general and specific skills, beliefs, and behaviors; and provide opportunities for youth to develop relationships with peers and mentors (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). Year-round educational opportunities vary widely on several dimensions, such as the settings in which they take place, the operators of the programs, and the content or focus of the activities (McLaughlin & Pitcock, 2009). The diversity of program offerings comes from the need for flexibility — meeting the assorted needs, preferences, and resources of youth, families, and communities — and ongoing responsiveness to changing political, ideological, and social views of program purposes.

Rationale

ACA supports a system that recognizes every child's right to a developmentally appropriate approach to education: experiential learning experiences that enhance academic skills; build character; provide outdoor education; and promote positive behaviors, self-confidence, and healthy risk taking. Beyond academics, young people need to be exposed to different environments and experiences that enable them to socialize in out-of-school situations with a wider variety of individuals. Participation in structured, constructive activities focused on positive social behaviors (rather than simply hanging out with friends or watching television, for example) has been shown to significantly increase positive developmental outcomes (Bartko & Eccles, 2003).

Children need to integrate academic learning into other contexts, such as the outdoors, to "test" knowledge learned in classrooms. Outside of school, youth must search out resources and become proactive, active agents in their own learning, and this promotes many individual benefits such as initiative (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006), self-determination (Dawes & Larson, 2011), and confidence (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). Participation in out-of-school educational programs provides exposure to new activities and people, as well as to opportunities for self-expression and identity development.

No longer viewed only as places for children to "decompress" and have fun during out-of-school time, camps have embraced the concept of development of the whole child. Camps are assuming a greater role in year-round education and youth development, recognizing that the same "fun" activities and programs that they have traditionally offered are in fact highly effective alternative learning models. Camps can be a safe place from pressures in school because of their heavy focus on social and emotional objectives, much lower youth-adult ratios, higher levels of supervision and management, and greater instructional intent and skill (Zmudy, Curtner-Smith, & Steffen, 2009). As education advocates search for ways to provide character education, social development, and solutions to summer learning loss, camps are uniquely positioned to fill the gaps with proven, effective programming.

"Summer learning loss" is a major concern to educators and national policy makers. While this concern applies to all children, it is especially troubling in children from low-income families. Studies show that about one-half of the achievement gap between youth from low- and high-income families at the beginning of high school is attributed to summer learning loss (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). Academic disparities between low-income and high income children increase as children grow older, and the achievement gap widens (Terzian, Moore, & Child, 2009). Year-round education, especially in the summer, can narrow the gap. However, children who would stand to benefit the most from out-of-school-time learning programs are the least likely to participate in them, due to barriers related to cost and proximity. In fact, only 25 to 36 percent of children aged six to eleven years attend summer programs (excluding traditional school-based "summer school") (Terzian, Moore, & Child, 2009).

For those youth who do attend summer camp programs, evidence continues to grow for the positive effects that camp has on young people's development and education. Examples include:

- Summer camps can motivate students to plan and prepare to enter postsecondary education upon graduation from high school (Beer, Le Blanc, & Miller, 2008).
- Summertime educational programs have shown increases in literacy (Borman, Goetz, & Dowling, 2009), reading comprehension (Schacter & Jo, 2005), and language learning (Feuer, 2009).
- Camp has positively influenced the youth development outcomes of adventure/exploration, independence, making friends, positive identity, and peer relationships (Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007).

- Camp has positive implications for identity development; social, physical, and thinking skills; and positive values and spirituality (Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007).
- Camp participation can improve self-esteem and self-efficacy (Readdick & Schaller, 2005), social competencies (Hanes, Rife, & Laguna, 2005), and skill building (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Garst & Bruce, 2003).

Today, many camps contribute to learning even during the traditional school year. Camps are increasingly partnering with schools to provide experiential education in character development, leadership opportunities, community living, environmental awareness and action, social and cognitive development, and increased positive identity. During the school year, many school districts (e.g., Los Angeles and Houston) utilize nearby camps for their staff, programs, and facilities to advance their educational goals and achieve their mandates (particularly in science) and for the value of outdoor education as an integral part of students' educations.

At most camps, children are physically active and in the outdoors for much of the time. Stephen Kellert, a strong advocate for and researcher of children and nature, has found that direct experience in nature is important to children's intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, and physical development (2005). Time spent in the outdoors can mitigate some health threats such as sedentary behavior and attention deficit disorder (Moore & Cooper Marcus, 2008). Research also has shown that additional time spent in physical activity has been linked to small increases in students' grade point averages and more efficient classroom learning, as well as positive associations with children's physical fitness, concentration, memory, behavior, and school satisfaction (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). A study of weeklong residential outdoor education programs found increases in mastery of science concepts, cooperation and conflict resolution skills, self-esteem, positive environmental behavior, problem-solving, motivation to learn, and classroom behavior (American Institutes for Research, 2005).

Children benefit from appropriate risk taking during outdoor play because social and environmental issues (e.g., traffic, lack of space, other time demands, and parental fears) are lessened in structured outdoor experiences where they can develop and refine their motor skills and gain confidence in being physically active (Little & Wyver, 2008). Taylor and Kuo examined how nature can soothe ADD/ADHD symptoms and found that children concentrated better after walking in a park setting, as compared to either a downtown or residential setting, and that differences in concentration levels narrowed between children with and without ADHD after walking in parks (2009). These researchers have also found that access to nature nurtures self-discipline, peace, and self-control (Kuo & Taylor, 2005; Taylor, Kuo, Spencer, & Blades, 2006; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2002). The ability to have self-control, concentration, and other positive qualities can carry over to academic settings, leading to academic achievement.

Call to Action

The camp community is experienced and equipped to participate in the positive development of children and youth throughout the year. Those involved in the positive development of children and youth need to partner with one another in order to provide well-rounded, developmentally appropriate, year-round learning opportunities. The camp community is an important partner. Young people need and benefit from experiences that teach them a variety of skills and put them in environments outside of the school setting where they can exercise leadership and character. Bell and Carrillo (2007) suggest that the most effective summer programs give strong attention to the characteristics of accelerating learning, youth development, proactive approaches to learning, leadership, advanced planning, staff development, strategic partnerships, evaluation and commitment to program improvement, and sustainability and cost-effectiveness. Camps have been fine-tuning these characteristics for over 150 years and are well-suited to provide innovative and stimulating positive learning experiences for youth.

One of the goals of ACA is to increase the number of children, youth, and adults of all social, cultural, and economic groups who have a camp experience each year. ACA urges youth development advocates to promote partnerships between traditional education venues, community organizations, and camps, and to initiate dialogue focusing on year-round educational opportunities and the extension of organized camp experiences to all children, especially those with limited resources and access to quality programs.

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