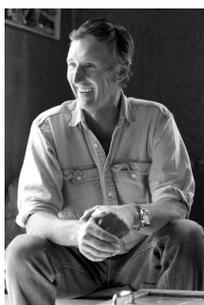


Why high-tech kids need summer camp

BY JIM WILTENS



DEER CROSSING



High Sierra Summer Camp
SINCE 1983

“Why should I spend money to send my children to summer camp?” Kathy Mason asked. “Will my kids get something out of camp they can’t get the rest of the year?” She looked at me expectantly. More and more, parents want to know if there are specific benefits associated with the camp experience. Kathy was no exception.

There are a number of things that happen at camp which make it a unique experience in a child’s development, especially in today’s high-tech world. Summer camp can benefit high-tech kids in four distinct areas.

Balancing education

If a child’s experiences always take place in a technological world, they get a one-sided education. In his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner purports that IQ tests and school curricula tend to measure and promote one, or at best, two of the seven potential forms of intelligence. Logical-mathematical thinking is a heavy favorite in our society, followed by linguistic ability. Schools are heavily swayed by technological desires, and many ignore or depreciate other forms of intelligence.

So what’s the big deal? The big deal is that this imposes limitation. For instance, logical thought processes, idolized in Western culture, are often not the source of quantum leaps in knowledge. Great discoveries have often been the result of leaping off the tracks of logic, moving laterally with great bounds from one discipline to another, often unrelated and less than logical. Roger Von Oech, in *A Whack on the Side of the Head*, refers to the creative process as “soft thinking,” a skill that “... much of our education is geared toward eliminating ... or at best, teaching us to regard ... as an inferior tool.”

If the soul of the robot dictates what we value as intelligence, millions of children will suffer. Many children are gifted with other forms of intelligence such as spatial, kinesthetic, and two forms of personal intelligence—interpersonal, knowing how to deal with others, and intrapersonal,

knowledge of self. Schools that praise children for a single type of intelligence create an environment in which poor self-esteem is fostered in those children not motivated towards logical- mathematical forms of intelligence. A poor self-image in turn hinders a child’s efforts in developing his other abilities. It can lower the self-esteem of many children, and for those considered “intelligent,” promote a single way of thinking.

Summer camps offer an alternate environment. Experiential activities are the mainstay of camp programs, and such activities are different from traditional teaching methods. Learning at camp tends to involve many senses. For example, a school may show a child a picture of a dissected dragonfly, a flat two-dimensional representation of life. But at camp, when you see that dragonfly dart across a pond, rainbows dancing on her armored torso, hear the “rrrrrr” of her wings when she comes so close she makes you flinch, you have a knowledge of dragonflies that doesn’t come from books. The holistic experiences at camp involve multiple senses and feelings, and gives children the chance to discover their talent in an environment that encourages the use of different types of intelligence.

The consumer gremlin

Another gremlin created by technology is an insatiable preoccupation with acquisition. The hype we are bombarded with daily creates a confused value system. Children begin to mix “I need” with “I want.” “Without that dress, I’m nothing.” “I’ll just die if I can’t get a concert ticket.” “I’ve got to have an iPad.” Unwarranted stresses are piled on our children (not to mention ourselves) by a form of media pollution. I am not a valid human being unless I use that mouthwash, wear those jeans, get my hair cut at that salon, sport Ralph Lauren shirts, and drink the ‘now’ generation soda. These are all “I wants” that advertising labels “I needs.” The confusion of needs and wants is established early on by a media that uses technology to permeate our conscious hours.

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Photo by Jaime Emery

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Self-reliance is not found in a cellophane wrapper

Technology breeds a misplaced dependence on artificial things. Water comes from a tap, food from a supermarket, heat from a dial on the wall, and the world is composed of asphalt, boards, and concrete. Children fail to grasp that the technical world is not self-sustaining. It has no energy of its own. Rather it draws its power from nature.

Being technologically dependent can affect a child's sense of self-reliance. If most of the needs and comforts a child equates with existence are produced by a mechanized society, there is a strong pressure to conform. Survival seems to depend on a manufactured habitat.

Part of the solution is balance. Summer camps are often in rural or wilderness surroundings, giving children contact with nature. At a farm camp, a child may experience tremendous delight in picking tomatoes for the evening meal or collecting eggs for breakfast. Higher in the mountains, another group prepares to sleep under the stars, far from buildings and civilization. Yet another camper uses the wind to power his boat to an island destination. All of these experiences establish a rapport with nature. Removed from the confines of an increasingly interdependent society, children may come to know the simplicity of self-dependence. In addition, nature takes on a new meaning. It's a chance to see that our well-being as a species is related to the well-being of Mother Nature.

Spectator vs. participant

Another unbalanced aspect of technology is the encouragement of spectator over participant activities. It is ironic that as technology reduces the hours in our workweek, we spend progressively more hours as technological spectators. The less we work, the lazier we become. Children are being domesticated to spectatorship. Real participation, challenges, and goals are being replaced by the often unattainable and not necessarily wholesome pursuits of screen demi-heroes like Indiana Jones, Batman, and Luke Skywalker. When we relinquish our own adventures for those of imaginary heroes, we become voyeurs of life. Being a watcher contains no effort, no risks, no commitment. It's a subtle, hypnotic pleasure with a tendency to desensitize us to reality.

Summer camp is a counterbalancing participant activity. At camp, everyone is a 'doer.' You carry your own pack, paddle your own canoe, saddle your own horse, and catch your own fish. Thrills are not vicarious, neither is the sweat, risk, or commitment. You've heard the statement, "I exist, therefore I am;" at camp, it is, "I do, therefore I exist." Participation is an attitude, and like all attitudes, it is learned.

High tech kids need balance. Summer camp is one way to regain that sense of equilibrium. Don't misunderstand me. Technology is a marvelous thing, but like all shiny new things, it can catch and hold our attention. If it holds our attention too long, we may acquire a set of technological blinders and develop tunnel vision in a three-dimensional world.

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