



Education Solutions for Tough Times

How summer camp can fill the gaps in your kids' education that are being created by school budget cuts.

By Natalie Kurylko, on behalf of the Association for Experiential Education

During a recession, the economy suffers on all levels—federal, state, county and, yes, right down to the school district level. When that happens, everyone starts taking a second look at budgets and one of the first line items to be scrutinized—on all levels—is education.

This ripple effect can be seen across the United States right now. Regional newspapers nationwide are reporting extreme measures being taken by districts to deal with the budget crisis: The Oakridge School District in Oregon, for example, is going to four-day school weeks; some districts in New Mexico are cutting their free-lunch programs for disadvantaged kids and doing away with after-school sports entirely; Michigan communities hit hard by Detroit's woes are looking at closing schools entirely; and thousands of teachers in California are facing the prospect of losing their jobs at the end of this academic year. These are just a few examples—similar cuts are taking place across the U.S.

The result? On an immediate level, more students per teacher means less specialized attention, leading to kids who fall through the cracks and eventually drop out. And massive cuts are being made to what are often considered "less necessary" programs, such as after-school sports, arts, music and extracurricular activities—the very things that keep many kids motivated to stay in school and keep up their grades.

As Obama pointed out in his speech on education delivered on February 26, making cuts to education is short sighted: Today's students will determine our economic health in the not-so-distant future. How well we educate our students will determine our country's long-term health. "It is time to prepare every child, everywhere in America, to out-compete any worker, anywhere in the world," said Obama. "It is time to give all Americans a complete and competitive education from the cradle up through a career. We have accepted failure for too long. Enough. America's entire education system must once more be the envy of the world."

While Obama's words hold out promise for the future of our educational system, an increasing number of parents are faced with the immediate challenge of filling in the gaps because of what their kids are no longer getting during the school day. Why are sports important? Why is

art important? Why is music important? Over the past decade, countless research studies have shown that such enrichment programs keep kids motivated and actually facilitate learning in traditional classroom subjects.

Take, for example, the results of a cross-sectional study completed by the California Department of Education (CDE) (2002) that included a sample of 954,000 students in grades five (353,000), seven (322,000), and nine (279,000). The study individually matched Stanford Achievement Test Ninth Edition (SAT-9) standardized test scores with results of the state-mandated, teacher-administered, physical fitness test, known as the Fitnessgram. The six fitness standards included in the Fitnessgram are cardiovascular endurance, body composition, abdominal strength and endurance, trunk strength and flexibility, upper body strength and endurance, and overall flexibility. Results of the CDE study included a "statistical analysis indicating a distinct and linear correlation between students' academic achievement and fitness scores" in all three grades; the higher the students' fitness level, the higher the academic performance, with the greatest academic gains in students who met three or more physical fitness standards. The fitness-academic link was greater in mathematics than in reading. Additionally, the fitness-academic link was stronger in females than in males. (n.d., Scheuer & Mitchell).

Similarly, "Researchers have found the first evidence that young children who take music lessons show different brain development and improved memory over the course of a year compared to children who do not receive musical training" (*ScienceDaily*, Sept. 20, 2006).

The benefits of art on youth are no less dramatic. "Typically, arts-centered schools have fewer dropouts, higher attendance, better team players, an increased love of learning, greater student dignity, and enhanced creativity, and they produce citizens better prepared for the workplace of tomorrow and with greater cultural awareness as a bonus" (Fiske, 2001).

So, what can you, as a parent, do now to ensure your kid gets a well-rounded education? With summer on the horizon, an immediate solution presents itself: summer camp. There are more than 12,000 day and residential camps in the United States that serve approximately 11 million youth and adults per year. The variety of programming they offer is broad. According to the American Camp Association (www.aca.org; ACA), 88% of ACA-accredited camps offer swimming, 48% offer horseback riding, 22% offer wilderness programs, 12% offer travel/tour programs, 57% offer teambuilding, and 21% involve campers in community service.

In a recent ACA survey, 75% of camp directors reported adding new activities and programs over the last few years. The newest program additions in recent years are challenging and adventurous activities, including high and low ropes courses, climbing walls, zip lines, backpacking, mountain biking and cave exploring. More than 50% of ACA-accredited camps offer ropes course activities or have other constructed adventure/challenge facilities. There is also an increased emphasis on performing arts and fine arts such as dance, theater, singing, ceramics, leather crafts, woodworking, photography, etc.

In another ACA survey of ACA-accredited as well as non-accredited camps, more than half of the camps reported having community service or good deed programs incorporated into their programs. The top projects conducted at camps were community clean-ups, food drives, recycling programs, and volunteering with senior citizens and hospital patients.

What do the above activities teach kids? Between 2001 and 2004, ACA hired an independent research firm to conduct research with over 5,000 families from 80 ACA-Accredited camps to determine the outcomes of the camp experience as expressed by parents and children and reported by camp staff. The four-year study revealed that parents, camp staff, and children reported significant growth in self-esteem, independence, leadership, friendship skills, social comfort, peer relationships, adventure and exploration, environmental awareness, values and decisions, and spirituality. (For specifics, see <http://www.acacamps.org/research/enhance/directions.pdf>).

If you were reading through the long list of activities camps offer and thinking “There’s no way I can afford to send my kid to camp,” know this: 90% of ACA-accredited camps offer some form of financial assistance to over 1 million children who are from economically deprived families, have special medical needs, or special situations that might preclude them from attending camp.

So, what are you waiting for? Summer’s a great time to get kids outside. Leave them to their own devices come the out-of-school months, and most kids will stay inside—plugged into some kind of electronic media source. In fact, the average youth spends an average of 5.5 hours per day plugged in! (source: “Generation M: Media in the Lives of Eight- to Eighteen-Year-Olds,” research conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). Get ’em outside, and the physical benefits are obvious, and the social, emotional and development benefits are proven. Think of summer camp as an investment in your kid’s—and our culture’s—future: As economists scrutinize what ails the United States today, many point to the poor education our kids are receiving. The future of our country’s financial and environmental health depends on the education we give our kids today.

Recommended Reading

Last Child in the Woods, by Richard Louv

A Whole New Mind by Daniel H. Pink

Beyond Ecophobia, by David Sobel

Enriching the Brain, by Eric Jensen

Recommended Resources

The Association for Experiential Education[®] (AEE) is professional membership organization, many of whose members are recreational and therapeutic camps. AEE also has the premier outdoor adventure program accrediting body, the AEE Accreditation Program, which specializes in the assessment of outdoor adventure programs and establishing best practices for the outdoor program industry. AEE member programs are especially committed to incorporating reflection in their programming to enhance participant experience and make what participants learn transferable. More than 120 of AEE's member programs are camps, 10 percent of which are accredited by AEE. To learn more about AEE and the benefits of getting youth outdoors, go to www.aee.org.

The American Camp Association[®] (ACA) works to preserve, promote and enhance the camp experience for children and adults. ACA-Accredited[®] camp programs ensure that children are provided with a diversity of educational and developmentally challenging learning opportunities. There are over 2,400 ACA-accredited camps that meet up to 300 health and safety standards. For more information, visit www.ACAcamps.org.

CampParents.org is a comprehensive camp resource for families—offering expert advice from camp professionals on camp selection, readiness, child and youth development, and issues of importance to families. To find the perfect camp for your child, or for expert advice and camp planning information, visit www.CampParents.org.

The Children & Nature Network (C&NN) was created to encourage and support the people and organizations working to reconnect children with nature. C&NN provides access to the latest news and research in the field and a peer-to-peer network of researchers and individuals, educators and organizations dedicated to children's health and well-being. Visit www.childrenandnature.org.

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