

A Reminder of Summer Camp's Value

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By Lockie Hunter



In a world of video games, cell phones and text messaging, the suggestion of communing with nature is becoming an increasingly lost one.

Richard Louv explores this dilemma in his book “Last Child in the Woods.” He coined the term “nature deficit disorder” to describe the trend towards indoor activities for children.

Louv quotes one scientist who notes that, “we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature.” Are our children losing far more than simply fresh air?

Adam Boyd, of Camp Merri-Mac in Black Mountain, is “convinced that we are made to live life together, and that happens in a great camp in a way that it does not happen anywhere else.”

“It is fascinating to hike with a group of children to the bottom of a large granite wall or waterfall, or even a big tree,” Boyd said. “As they get closer they start to look up through the woods to see if they can catch a glimpse. They can tell that something huge is there. When they finally reach their objective they will almost always walk over and put their hands on it. It is like they are amazed at how real it is.”

Sandra Bass, at Camp Judaea in Hendersonville, agrees.

“The outdoor setting of a summer camp is magical for the children,” Bass said. “It gives them a feeling of freedom that they don’t have in this day and age with iPods, computers, the Wii and school. The mountain air, tall pine trees and lush fields draw the campers back to the basics of being free. All outdoor camps give children an appreciation for nature that they do not get from anything else they do.”

Benefits of Camp

In addition to the magic, sense of freedom and awe at the wonder of nature that outdoor camps offer, there may also be other benefits. Since many indoor pursuits, like video gaming, are solitary ones, children may be missing not only a chance to discover nature, but an opportunity to discover themselves.

“I believe that a residential camp setting is essential in helping children gain independence,

developing social skills and group development. Camp is the single most influential tool available for educators to give children a greater sense of self,” Bass said.

Many camp activities are designed with a combination of self-reliance and team skills to allow children to achieve goals and gain self-esteem while understanding the importance of friendships.

Rock climbing and wall climbing serve this dynamic well.

Van Van Horne, of Lutheridge in Arden, said, “Lutherock’s on-site rock climbing is an adventure that gives the climber a great sense of accomplishment with caring support from the other folks in the group.”

Moreover, the bonds made at camp may be lasting ones. The friendships forged around the campfire or in the woods seem to be special.

“We say a child plays a video game, but that is not playing; that is watching something we control,” Boyd said. “Real play engages the whole person, physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually. You cannot become a friend, or make a friend, sitting in front of a screen.”

In addition, studying nature may improve a child’s creative thought processes through active, rather than passive, engagement.

“There is a reason science classes have lab experiments,” Boyd said. “We can learn a lot from a textbook, but there is something different when we cause something to happen, rather than just learn how to make it happen. We learn wonderful things in books, but lives are changed in the laboratory, and mountains, rivers and creeks are the best laboratory.”

Louv points out that “unlike television, nature does not steal time: it amplifies it. Nature inspires creativity in a child by demanding visualization and the full use of senses.”

There are intangible benefits from being in an outdoor setting that are difficult to express.

Louv said he believes that “nature presents the young with something so much greater than they are; it offers an environment where they can easily contemplate infinity and eternity.”