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Why summer camp is important for Generation Y

Young adults born between 1984 and 2002—known as Generation Y or the Millennial generation—are the most educated in American history and—like the generation of baby boomers—one of the largest.

Yet these adults have grown up in an age of instant gratification: iPhones, iPads, instant messaging, Instagram, and SnapChat all provide immediate access to data. The young people have hundreds if not thousands of Facebook and Twitter "friends," but often few real connections.

On the flip side, a child who goes to sleep-away camp makes real connections. Camp may be the last place a child can have quality face-time, a place where he or she may get away from parents, the same people who have seemingly shifted from teaching self-reliance to hovering like helicopters, protecting their children at all costs.

According to Wendy Mogel, Ph.D., who wrote the best-selling *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, "Parents today find it harder than ever to uphold their own values within their families, when they seem so at odds with those of our current culture. We seek security in a society that seems more and more dangerous, grace that thrives on competition, and gratitude in an age of ever-increasing materialism. How can this generation of parents raise self-reliant, compassionate, and ethical children?"

Children need role models besides their parents—people that they can trust—to provide guidance and help lay a solid foundation.

Photos: Melissa Weinberger

The answer is summer camp, where kids go outside and play.

Preparing Children For Adulthood

At home, some parents fill their children's spare time with organized activities, do homework for them, and resolve their conflicts at school with both friends and teachers. Children often receive trophies for just showing up.

We must prepare children for the future by letting them fall, fail, and fear. If they don't take risks early on—like climbing the monkey bars and possibly falling off—they are fearful of every new endeavor at age 27.

There is more to preparing children for adulthood than receiving an academic education, however. Children who spend their summers at camp are better prepared for later decisions, like whether to go to college, and how to make the best life for themselves. Teens in particular need mentors they trust, separate from their parents. These role models provide guidance and help the children lay a solid foundation.

At camp, children learn to stretch their boundaries, experiencing life through the eyes of someone whose life is not a mirror image of their own. By doing so, camp increases their self-esteem and confidence, and fosters their independence. That's what makes camp such a life-changing experience.

Charles Eliot, a former president of Harvard University, said, "I have a conviction that a few weeks spent in a well-organized summer camp may be of more value educationally than a whole year of formal school work."

His statement still holds true, especially for the Millennial generation. Some of the coolest kids at camp might be labeled as nerds, geeks, or worse at home. At summer camp, children are accepted for who they are.

When children are taken out of their usual environment, the rules are altered. Authenticity is rewarded. Responsibility is cool. Maturity adds clout.

The Role Of Camp Counselors

Camp counselors are also members of Generation Y. Since the 2008 recession, they have been facing one of the worst job markets in decades. They are in debt. Many of

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College students working at camp learn the importance of focusing attention on others. Counselors are trained to be present for the campers rather than for themselves.

them are unemployed. Today's young adults have been forced to rethink success so that it's less about material prosperity and more about happiness. Rather than chasing money, they appear to want a job that fulfills them.

Over the past 17 summers, I have seen camp counselors discover that working with children is rewarding. As a result, they often switch their majors to education, recreation, psychology, or social work.

Michael Thompson, Ph.D., says that counselors help young people explore by encouraging them to embrace opportunities, try new things, meet new people, and accept failure as part of growth.

"Children love to learn, but they get tired of being taught by adults. Children want to learn from older children, and, at a camp, that means older campers and camp counselors," he says. "They want to live with them, emulate them, and absorb them. In our age-segregated society, camp is the only place in America where an 11-year-old can get the sustained attention of a 19-year-old. In return for the attention of these 'older children,' campers will

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make sacrifices. They will follow all kinds of rules and adhere to all kinds of rituals that they would likely fight at home."

College students working at camp learn the importance of focusing attention on others. Counselors are trained to be present for the campers rather than for themselves. College-age students possess a completely different type of authority than parents have, so they can get children to set tables, make beds, keep track of their clothes, take showers, take turns and, more importantly, take risks and accept challenges that would normally make parents extremely anxious.

Counselors often teach complex, challenging skills: sailing, horseback riding, rock climbing, whitewater kayaking, and survival techniques. They also teach character and community, caring and sacrifice. Campers typically rank counselors as some of the most influential people in their lives.

Investing In Independence

I was at a camp fair a few years ago when a mother said to me, "I don't want to get rid of my kids for the summer." I told her that camp was one the greatest gifts she could ever give her child. Camp is an investment for the parents so their child can become a more independent and confident person.

Camp teaches a child how to grow up. Camp teaches a child about responsibility and the importance of meaningful relationships. Sleep-away camp, in particular, is an intense experience because it is 24/7.

Unlike "friends" on Facebook, camp friends often become lifelong relationships. Children can be who they want to be at camp; the pressures that exist at home do not exist at camp.

At camp, kids don't worry about being "cool." They can truly be themselves. CB

Ephram Caflun *of Ridgewood is director of a resident children's summer camp in Maine. He began working with children in a professional setting in 1993, but says that being a father to his three sons is the most important job he will ever have. Reach him at ephram@campwekeela.com.*

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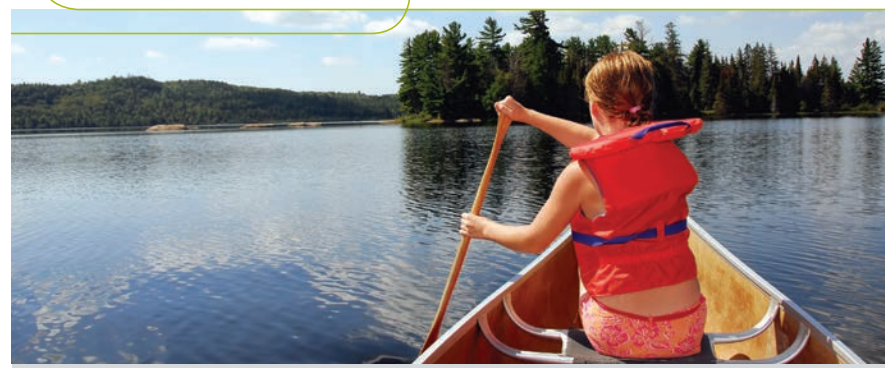

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