

Can Camp Influence a Child's Future Career?

By Jill Cueni-Cohen

According to Peg Smith, chief executive officer of the American Camp Association® (ACA), many American teens graduating from high school are not fully equipped to deal with college, the workforce, or adult life. On the one hand, the US has the highest percentage of graduating seniors choosing to attend colleges or universities; however, we also have the highest percentage of freshmen dropping out.

In fact, recent research from the nonprofit Partnership for 21st Century Skills, which is comprised of corporate leaders and educators, showed a startling gap in our education system between the “3 Rs” and what employers are actually looking for when seeking new employees. Smith said this gap can be blamed on technological advances which have also hindered children’s exposure to human interaction.

“The antidote to many of the issues created by modern society — a supplement to what kids learn in schools — might be found right down the road at camp,” said Smith, noting that camp experiences that require children to take risks, meet new people, master new skills and deal with being away from their parents at the same time are brain-building as well as character-building.

“The expectations of camp have changed,” said Dionne Brelsford, director of programs at Winchester Thurston’s Summer Camp. “When I was a camper 30 years ago, we would ride our bikes to summer recreation, and we’d basically be on our own. It was just supervision to pass the day. Now, everything is extremely focused; based on the affinity of the child. Now the parents want their children to have a takeaway: a creation, a feeling, an outcome.”

This summer, children as young as pre-kindergarten up to sixth grade will be dabbling in themed camps at Winchester Thurston’s north campus that feature everything from gnomes and fairies to cooking, arts in a variety of mediums, sports, outdoor exploration, chemistry, technology and more.

“Summer is an amazing time for enrichment, learning, growth, and fun at Winchester Thurston’s Summer Camp,” said Brelsford, adding that last year, Winchester Thurston hosted more than 2,000 campers from 109 different schools. “It truly is a wonderful community event, and our goal is to inspire campers to explore, stretch and grow through unique and challenging summer experiences.”

Originally held at Camp Kon-O-Kwee and now located at The Family Retreat Center in Cranberry, Helena Schaefer has been running overnight Language Camp for one week each summer for the past 30 years. Language Camp was one of the first “specialized” camps, and as Schaefer looks into the future, she sees a need for even more learning opportunities to take place in the camp environment.

“We like to make our camps be very vital and we’re always adding new things,” said Schaefer, acknowledging fierce competition from the hundreds of specialized camps now offered. “Cheerleading, dance, science... there were never so many camps like there are today, and they all offer a huge variety of themes.”

Schaefers said Language Camp has indeed contributed to the careers of former campers. "My daughter is a high school German teacher, and I credit camp with that. She wasn't interested in me teaching her the language, but she really loved camp, and that was what steered her into her career," said Schaefers, adding that several others are now living and working abroad as a result of their childhood experiences around the campfire.

"We have our hearts in the learning of languages and believe it's better for training the mind," Schaefers explained, noting that learning a foreign language is easier in the camp environment, where the kids can be immersed and absorb knowledge almost without knowing it. "It's valuable to know another language, and this could even help you in your future career. You might be hired over someone else because you know another language."

Computer and robotics skills have become popular camps, especially when public schools are slow to offer such opportunities to elementary students. According to Maria Yamanaka of Green E Academy in Franklin Park, computer science-based learning at camp comes in the form of video games and robots. "They come to video game design camp because they enjoy playing computer games. But here they learn how to program the games. Suddenly, they're not consumers anymore, they're creating their own games and characters," she said. "We're developing logical thinking here, so when they have to code in the future. They will remember what they learned, and it's familiar. This gets them inspired and makes them more interested, and they will not be afraid of doing something new. It's just like language. The earlier you learn this, the better."

"When you sign up for camp, it's unlike school or something you regularly do, because you're thrown in with a group of people that you've never met, and that's like life," said James Hilton, principal of Jubilee Christian School in Dormont. For the first time, the school will be offering camp for community youngsters. "Kids can think something is just fun, but that fun can carry them on, and they might learn something at camp that takes them to a profession. It's a risk-free environment so you can try something new."