

CAMP CAN BE A PLACE TO THRIVE

by Brian Lux, MAT



FOR MANY PARENTS whose children have ADHD or are twice-exceptional, summer marks the end of a school year rife with organizational, social, and academic challenges. From homework hassles to organizational black holes and home/school communications, a high level of frustration can develop in both parents and children. Research-informed summer camps provide an opportunity for children to develop perspective-taking and social resilience skills. This manifests in increased confidence while having fun in an environment that is built upon intentionality and best practices for positive development.

It is generally accepted that it takes a minimum of three weeks to develop a habit; it often takes additional time for strong or complex habits to form. So, while shorter-duration summer programs can certainly offer respite for parents and caregivers, there is no meaningful data that supports habit formation in less than about three weeks. Several studies show that longer-duration programs offer the best opportunity for success in building habits. The best camps offer residential programs that reflect the desire to have meaningful transferability of skills to home and school life. This is the evidence-informed rationale for having sessions lasting three weeks or longer.

Research shows that building a community is key to social-emotional learning. Forging connections takes time and space. An intentional community that is built to understand children during the summer is a key first step in providing them tools for success. These programs can be focused specifically on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), outdoor skills, art, music, or all of the above. It is important to provide a child with an opportunity to tap into interest centers as a means to facilitate “buy-in” for social skills development.

There is a measurable value to having children self-select activities at camp based upon their interests. We all know the frustration that can result when a child’s first class of the day is undesirable, possibly setting a negative tone for the entire day. Camps that break the mold of having all twelve-year-olds engage in all the same activities at the same time have several demonstrated benefits. First, the value of the child’s interests is validated throughout the process, and they take ownership in decision-making. Second, lasting and meaningful friendships are based upon shared interests with age-mates who understand what makes them tick (shared worldview). A twelve-year-old is much more likely to have a positive day, and a more positive experience, if camp consists of activities the child selects alongside peers who similarly choose these activities.

We’ve seen tremendous results from this inquiry-based teaching model at Camp Sequoia. Children build confidence with their peers in activities that they mutually select. Later in the camp season they often expand out to choose new and more challenging activities—with their new camp friends. In terms of social skills success, this is exactly the type of organic growth that fosters continued patterns of success—and the ability to appropriately weather the occasional social failure. It can be difficult for students who haven’t experienced a great deal of deep social connection with peers to weather these failures without scaffolded support from appropriately trained adults.

Teachable moments

Many children diagnosed with ADHD struggle with age-appropriate responses to situations that push their buttons. Often this is either seen at school or at home (and sometimes both). In an evidence-informed camp environment, children have the opportunity both to see intentional staff modeling of social interactions and to participate in activities that feel like all of the fun and exciting things that camp can offer—but underneath have intentionally been crafted to foster teachable moments.

For example, our twelve-year-old camper might choose swimming or archery as a selected activity. The staff in a research-informed camp will then use the camp activities as a means to help children engage appropriately with each other. That might be passing a baton and using nonverbal communication skills between two children in the pool during a relay and then having a

debrief conversation about communication strategies at the end of the swim period. Likewise, it could be setting up an archery competition where staff can give campers both the opportunity to practice being a gracious winner and a supportive friend in both individual and group contests.

By having many activities in which children can engage their peers, there is a natural opportunity to go through supported successes and failures so that no one event can become catastrophized in the mind of the camper. After all, from a camper’s perspective, the next opportunity is just around the corner in a different camp activity or social venue. This is a critical developmental milestone inasmuch as there is a value in trying new things and becoming skilled, just as there is a value in not needing to be a winner at everything that is attempted.

Building this frustration tolerance, or how to deal with situations that push buttons, is a critical social skill. For example, not winning a game of Gaga should not be viewed by a camper as a catastrophic event. Taking a longer view, these social interaction skills are important as children transition to adulthood. Increasingly, companies prioritize social skills in the workplace. As explained by the research of David Deming published in the *Harvard Gazette*, strong social skills are increasingly in demand in both the STEM and non-STEM sectors of the economy.

The good news is that many of these skills can be learned at camp. This skillset has meaningful benefits to children long after the summer is over. Time and again, graduates return to thank camp staff for allowing them to develop and hone collaborative social skills. A nurturing camp environment, free from many of the social impediments intrinsic to an academic setting, allows this type of positive outcome.

Ultimately, every parent’s goal is to help their children become the best versions of themselves. Research-based summer programs are an excellent way to help them along their journey. **A**

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ADDITIONAL READING

Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, and Pachan M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45, 294–309.

Brigdeland, John; Bruce, Mary; Hariharan, Arya. The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools; A Report for CASEL. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED558068>

Powell, Alvin. Golden Age for Team Players: Strong social skills increasingly valuable to employers, study finds. *Harvard Gazette*; October 23, 2017. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/10/social-skills-increasingly-valuable-to-employers-harvard-economist-finds/>

Pellegrino JW, and Hilton ML, eds. Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century. *Report Brief, Education at the National Research Council*; National Academies Press, 2012.