



RICHARD MERWIN, CHAIRMAN
GERRY VANDEMERWE, CEO

FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Guest Voice/Letter to Editor Submission

Contact: Tammy Roche, 452-1432 or 566-9597

troche@ymcaerie.org

Summer Day Camp Helps Shape Personal Development of Kids and Teens, Experts Say

Kids just don't seem to play like they used to.

Decades ago, kids would take to the outdoors during the summer months. Today, many kids are more disconnected from nature and are less engaged in outside activities. According to the American Camp Association, children have lost 12 hours of free time a week over the last 20 years – eight of these lost hours were once spent in unstructured play and outdoor activities.

But getting outdoors is essential to developing the spirit, mind and body of school age children and teens, says YMCA of Greater Erie Vice President of Early Care & School-Age Enrichment Jill Simmons and camping is an ideal setting for doing just that.

"Camping is synonymous with personal development. It provides kids with the opportunity to practice social and decision making skills that are new to them," says Simmons. "Kids come to camp and make new friends, learn new skills, handle new responsibilities, and make memories that will last a lifetime."

Attending summer camp can impact kids and teens in several important ways:

- Kids learn when given a break from their daily routine. Camp offers kids and teens productive "unstructured" time and the independence to help make decisions they don't typically experience at home or in school.
- Lifelong memories are made at camp. Summer camp is the ideal environment for developing new skills, making new friends and learning from other campers and counselors.
- Decision-making skills are learned through experience. At camp, kids and teens learn and practice how to make smart choices, solve problems, and work as a team toward common goals. These skills are essential to character development.
- At camp, kids and teens develop confidence by trying and learning new things, including adventurous outdoor activities that can lead to healthy, life-long habits.
- Camp is the perfect environment for increasing kids and teens' awareness and appreciation of nature and the great outdoors.

Our Mission: To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy spirit, mind and body for all.



CORPORATE OFFICE
31 West 10th Street
Erie, PA 16501
(814) 452-1432

CAMP SHERWIN
8600 West Lake Road
Lake City, PA 16423
(814) 774-9416

COUNTY YMCA
12285 YMCA Drive
Edinboro, PA 16412
(814) 734-5700

DOWNTOWN YMCA
31 West 10th Street
Erie, PA 16501
(814) 452-3261

EASTSIDE YMCA
2101 Nagle Road
Erie, PA 16510
(814) 899-9622

GLENWOOD PARK YMCA
3727 Cherry Street
Erie, PA 16508
(814) 868-0867

Camp promotes community. It creates this great space that shows kids how to live together and care for one another. There are norms and negotiation of boundaries; there are rules. Camp is a place where kids can "practice" growing up stretching their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive muscles outside the context of their immediate family. This is what childhood is supposed to provide.

Camp teaches critical thinking. We need to remember how important it is to be actively involved in the learning process, and camp affords that. We're going to need really strong problem solvers in the next century. We need the science, math, and biology, but without the ability to relate, connect, empathize, or inspire innovation, how will our kids be able to make a difference in the challenges now facing us?

The camp experience embraces the natural environment. While children have fewer and fewer opportunities to be outdoors, the camp experience advances the outdoor learning environment. As we become more concerned about saving the planet, we run out and make DVDs and videos about it. But the environment needs to be *experienced* to be appreciated. Kids need to catch tadpoles in the creek, wander among the trees, and feel the sun on their faces to understand the importance of those things. What happens to a generation that may grow up not seeing stars in the dark of the night?

Camp creates future leaders. The camp experience offers kids a close-up look at compassionate leadership through the camp director, counselors, resident nutritionist, and other camp personnel. And kids get loads of opportunities to practice being a leader themselves — song leader, lunch table leader, team captain, the list goes on and on.

Camp is an equal opportunity life changer. It addresses universal childhood needs not specific to a particular racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group. Nobody is left out. It's all about childhood development.

Camp has a lasting impact. One of the greatest gifts you can give a child is a sense of success and achievement. Camp teaches kids how to be active participants, ask questions, ask for help, and try new things. They leave understanding that it's okay to feel a little uncomfortable sometimes, because that's generally what happens when you're getting ready to learn something. The camp experience translates back in real-world experience — in an "I can" attitude.

We need to advocate for our young people. We should promote opportunities for kids — give them camp experiences that serve as an antidote for the world's challenges. We need to recognize this is not a series of frivolous activities. We often think if it looks like fun it must be unimportant, but "fun" is a young person's "work" — to learn, to grow, to be productive, creative, and happy. If they don't do that work, they won't turn into healthy adults.

The Summer Camp experience does not have to be cost prohibitive. According to Simmons, many summer camp experiences are available to families through financial aid.

“Locally, the Girls Scouts, Boy Scouts, YMCA of Greater Erie, Boys & Girls Club, Salvation Army and many community centers such as the Bayfront NATO Martin Luther King Center, JFK Center, Trinity Center, Booker T. Washington Center and others provide financial assistance programs or a low-cost or even free camping experience so that working families can afford to share the camping experience with their kids.”

Now, more than ever, kids need camp.

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