

Explaining the Value of Camping

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This is an abstract of the Keynote Address to the Annual Conference of the camping Association of Victoria, 25 June 1993. It draws on research that addresses the question of how camps nurture positive attitudes and skills and caring social behaviour in young people.

The purpose of this paper is to help camping professionals and those who use and support camping to solve an immediate practical problem: that of explaining and justifying camping experiences to decision makers. It should also help us all solve two immediate, long term, grand scale societal problems: those of how to stop and reverse the degradation of the environment and how to stop and reverse the degradation of human conduct.

(Editor's note: While the research referred to in this paper was conducted at U.S. camps, the principles and values expressed have universal application.)

As individuals and as a society, we are in the midst of a series of crises: crises of hunger, violence, war, ill health, new epidemics, and environmental disaster. . . . New or more widely available technology is not the answer, because we already have the technology to solve these problems of hunger or health or pollution, and we have the money. No, as E.F. Schumacher (1977, p. 140) said almost 20 years ago, 'there is no economic problem, and, in a sense, there never has been. But there is a moral problem. . . .' These crises are problems of human values and human will; they are crises of courage, hope, and love.

I celebrate camping because it can make a difference in the crises of courage, hope, and love, and ultimately, in the crises of hunger, violence, and environmental disaster. Camping nurtures the human spirit, and through the uplifting of the human spirit, we have reason to hope. Good camping demonstrates the real possibility of a good and peaceful society living in harmony with the environment.

Substantial, valid research supports this position, though it may not state it exactly that way. Children know it; you know it intuitively. In a research study Gale Orford and I conducted in 1989 in the United States, we asked an eight year old camper what she thought were the messages that her camp was trying to teach her. She replied, 'Peace.' This was the second day of camp. How could she possibly have gotten that message? We had been there for two days, observing camp since it had begun, and this was her first year at camp. We had not noticed any overt teaching about peace. We asked her, 'How do you know that camp is trying to teach you peace?' Her reply, 'Listen to the songs we sing.' And we thought back to the songs sung at mealtimes and around the campfire: Peace I Ask of Thee a River, Kumbayah, Rainbow Army, Canadian Wilderness, Make New Friends.... She knew on the second day that that particular camp was about peace.

We are charged with the task of explaining the value of camping to decision makers who influence whether we have the opportunity to serve children and adults through camp programs. They ask:

Is it worth the cost in dollars, staff time, and disruption to school and family?

Is it educationally sound?

Is it safe?

Is it necessary?

What does camping do that a week at school doesn't do, except give the kids a break?

To answer these questions, you need a philosophy of camping and a theory about how camping works.

My thesis, and my philosophy, is that camping is

a unique, positive educational experience which makes an important contribution to individuals and to society. It leads to outcomes which are different from those achieved in most schools, most non-residential recreational programs, and most families. In a well run program, camping achieves these outcomes for a large proportion of its campers. Camping has the potential to accelerate change and growth in individuals through its 24 hour intensity and the conditions unique to its setting and processes. As Dan Dustin said to the American Camping Association in 1989, camp is inherently powerful, but not inherently good; we must make sure that its power is used for good. Camps enable campers to see the consequences of their actions and to learn that they may make a difference in the world. The small, human scale community created in camp allows campers, in Dustin's words, 'to taste the possibility for the human family. . . , to sense their connectedness to other living things. . . , to have a glimpse of what can be. . . , to come home eager and enthusiastic, ready to take on the world' (1989, p. 11).¹

A philosophy of camping is a systematic set of values and beliefs about what camping can and should do for the people it serves. The statement of philosophy, whatever its form, is the basic framework upon which program is built; it is the source for guidance as you consider decisions to be made about every aspect of camp. Your camp's philosophy tells you whether to have round tables or square ones in the dining hall, and whether to offer day long programs or week long programs or both. It inspires the maintenance work as well as the staff hiring. And it tells you what songs to sing.

The camp philosophy addresses the following questions:

1. What values do I wish to teach and nurture through the camp program?
2. What are the outcomes I wish to see in the campers (and perhaps in the staff and in the land)?
3. What, then, are the educational goals of the camp program (or camp site)?

In preparing a philosophy, consider also what are the essential elements which make a camping program true camping, as distinct from a holiday away from school or family, or a residential recreation program, or school at a campsite. The American Camping Association in its definition of organised camping distinguishes a number of key elements:

[Organised camping is] a sustained experience which provides a creative, recreational and educational opportunity in group living in the out-of-doors. It uses trained leadership and the resources of the natural surroundings to contribute to each camper's mental, physical, social, and spiritual growth (1990, p. 3).

In the remaining material, I will focus on the research study referred to before, which examined the outcomes and dynamics in 18 different camps by interviewing over 300 campers, staff, directors, and camp alumni/ae, those who had been to these camps in the past. The report of the research is titled *I Am Somebody: The Messages and Methods of Organised Camping for Youth Development*, and the title 'I Am Somebody' reflects the powerful sense of self-worth which many camps nurture in young

people. [All page references in parentheses that follow are references to this report.]

From this research we have hundreds of stories of the impact of camping on young people. We talked to 80-year-old former Boy Scouts who had come to a camp reunion. They recalled camp experiences from the years just before World War I, and described the importance of those experiences for the rest of their lives. We heard of the most basic successes, the camper who by the end of camp did not scream with terror when a spider walked across the picnic table, and the most far-reaching, complex ones, the camper who was sent home from a camp, taking and leaving learning with him.

We were given a letter from a parent who wrote,

Year after year my kids come home from camp blooming with good will and self confidence. You have taught my serious responsible child to laugh and my happy laid-back child how to be a responsible leader. I wish you could bottle and sell your formula to our schools. (p. 1)

The primary question studied by the research project was how does participation in an organised resident camp program contribute to the development of positive attitudes and skills and of caring social behaviors in youth?

The camps visited included ones owned by churches, social and youth serving agencies, private foundations, and private individuals, serving boys and girls, either in single sex groups or in co-ed groups, whose ages ranged from 5 to 18. The number of campers served each camp session (which lasted an average of one to two weeks) ranged from a small camp of 55 to a very large one of 763. Many campers returned to the same camp year after year, and parents often sent their children to the camps they went to as youths.

We studied the camps' philosophies, and found that their goals could be grouped into nine major categories. These included goals about self-knowledge, character development, interpersonal skills, skill development, spiritual values, physical fitness and health, positive use of the group, positive experiences for campers - such as having fun, being treated as an individual, and feeling cared for - and environmental awareness, appreciation, and protection (pp. 18-19).

We found the essence of the camps' philosophies often expressed in a phrase, such as Cheley Colorado Camp's hiking program motto, 'We hike only as fast as our slowest hiker.' Often we heard this essence of philosophy expressed in a remark during an interview: at Camp Togowoods in Alaska, the director told us that 'if you teach kids about nature, they become gentler people.'

The outcomes of camp, as described by responses of the 318 campers, staff, directors and alumni/ae we interviewed, may be grouped into six major categories:

Learning of specific activity skills

Learning about oneself

Learning about group living and interpersonal skills

Having fun

Gaining an appreciation of nature

No change perceived.

Campers and staff could identify the values that camps taught them - values about responsibility, achievement, honesty, peace, loving, caring, cooperation, or teamwork. Two major values were

identified with regard to the environment: learning to live in harmony with wilderness, and protecting the environment.

As with any community, any family, any individual life, there are hard times, struggles, little hurts and sometimes bigger hurts. But good camps create a climate within which support and caring exist, where the hurts can be understood, and where what is gained is usually memorable, positive change. How is this climate created? How do camps encourage caring for others and the environment, service, and other positive outcomes? What are the unique conditions created in the camp community which enable the growth and change, which 'fortify', so to speak, the impact of what could look to others as simply living together, doing activities with leaders? How does camp work?

The answer is a theory of camping, and as with any useful explanation of human behaviour, it is a complex and rich statement. In its full version, it will disturb those who want simple answers. But perhaps it can be stated in a way that is brief and useable, while still true.

First of all, camp is different from school or home. In our interviews, the campers, staff, directors and alumni/ae pointed out eight differences they thought were important:

1. Parents aren't here.
2. No television.
3. We do different activities.
4. Learning is different at camp.
5. Camp has different values.
6. You have different relationships with peers, friends, and adults at camp.
7. Camp has a different environment than home.
8. I can be a different person at camp. (p. 110)

Thus, at its most basic, a theory of how camping works could be stated in terms of these key ideas:²

The outcomes of camp arise because campers are away from their parents and away from television, living simply in a small group, with positive role models and in a structured and supportive environment in which they have time to listen, talk, relax, and reflect, and in which they are learning through activities which are fun, which require them to work together, and which give them opportunities to make choices and to take responsibility (p. 95).

The factor of 'having time' was given much credit for 'how camp works'. 'Time translates to more attention to each individual, and, coupled with the relatively high ratio of adults to children in camp' (p. 97), unpressured time is a major facilitator of the process of change through camp.

Camp has a distinctive supportive environment, made up of four major dimensions: 'the outdoor setting, how individuals are treated, positive norms and expectations, and stability and structure' (p. 98). The outdoor setting has its own curative, mellowing, comforting effects; it encourages curiosity and freedom as well as an appreciation of beauty. Campers are treated as individuals, accepted, not stereotyped, respected, trusted, encouraged, praised, and loved. Positive norms implicit rules about accepted behaviour - were obvious in the camp where, outside the cabin door for one group, we saw a 'no put-down zone' sign; to counter the tendency of the young boys to pick on each other, the cabin group had a norm, an expectation, that put-downs were not okay. The positive norms and expectations

create a 'psychologically safe environment, [where] campers feel that it is okay to take risks, risks with new behaviours, new feelings' (p. 100). The structure and stability of camps also support the perceived safety of the environment, providing security and freedom. Going back to camp each year, knowing camp is still there, gives campers a sense of belonging, and in some cases of the older camps, a sense of connectedness with history, of being a part of 'something big.' All of these aspects of camp provide feedback and new information to campers about themselves and about the meaning of living in community and in the environment. Campers see new ways of being, and try them out. Camp is a caring community, one that values caring and service. In a good camp, campers 'see the possibilities for the human family' (Dustin 1989, p. 11).

'In a good camp' . . . an important phrase. These outcomes, these 'possibilities' do not come from simply booking a campsite and setting the dates, even from planning activities and hiring staff. Everything at camp is program, from the letter home to parents, to the bus ride to camp, to the ways beds are made and who sleeps next to each other, to the set-up for rock climbing, to the songs sung. And everything at camp, all this program must be carefully, lovingly constructed to create an environment in which all the elements harmonise, from the poster on the wall, to the way the camp leaders wake up the campers in the morning, to the place where the bus picks the group up at the end of camp. Camp directors, camp owners, good ones, tend to the littlest detail-like sitting at circular tables for meals and not passing food over any child, so that each child - even the youngest one who you may think can't hold the heavy serving plate, but who can if helped carefully and subtly- feels valued and feels as if he or she can make a contribution. It is a work of art, and you are the sculptors. It is a tremendous challenge, but it can be done, and you know how to do it.

To design this work of art, you need a clear idea of what you want to build, and for this, your philosophy- carefully considered, carefully stated - will serve you well.

So, we return to the questions of our decision makers, and I offer answers. You should perhaps check to see if you would feel comfortable giving these answers in relation to your camp.

Is it worth the cost in dollars, staff time, and disruption to school and family?

Camps light sparks in children and young people which may take flame now or which may require years to burn brightly (Dustin 1989) - but we know from research and experience that camping can lead to significant positive, even life-changing, outcomes.

Camps have the chance to reach the children who fail in schools or who simply pass time there, as well as to extend the horizons of those children who do succeed in school. If we have a tool through which to work on changing attitudes and behaviors towards violence, hunger, environmental degradation, how can you put a dollar value on it - but if you did, its return would be well beyond the investment.

Is it educationally sound?

The goals of camping, of *this* campsite and *this* camp program, address important educational issues. Further, through evaluation and research, we know that we are succeeding in achieving these goals for many of our campers.

Is it safe?

It *is* safe -psychologically and physically safe, physically safer, statistically speaking, than schools and families (at least according to U.S. data). Further, we have standards in place which to help maintain this safety. Unlike school, it's also an environment where it is safe to try and to fail, and to learn from that, while maintaining self-esteem.

Is it necessary?

It *is* necessary because of the urgency of societal problems and because nowhere else is there such a powerful medium to address together the need in young people to learn to live in peaceful, creative community, and in a community which is in harmony with the environment.

What does camping do that a week at school doesn't do, except give the kids a break?

It shows young people new and alternative ways of living, gives them time to consider them, supports them in change and growth. Camp is different from school in many significant ways.

And we return to our shared and very serious problem, the degradation of the environment and of human behaviour. As I said, these are not problems in need of technological or economic solutions. They are problems of human values and human will. They are problems of community and responsibility, of sacrifice and service. They are problems which camping, good camping, can help. The scale of our global problems is frightening, overwhelming, a scale which makes any reasonable individual feel powerless. But camp demonstrates community on a human scale, and helps young people and adults recognisethat they are not powerless, that they can take initiative, that they can start within themselves, be supported for that, and expand to the camp community, and, in time, to the larger community. Schools are good, but different. Families are good, but different. Neighbourhoods rarely work as communities, and churches and religious groups rarely work in as sustained a manner as is required for the changes and growth needed. 'Camp is probably one of the few places for children to be working, needed members of a community. It's a place to learn without expecting return' (p. 132).

What I am saying to you and to the decision makers among you and around you is that what you do is very important, and it is clearly something to celebrate. In the face of crises of courage, hope, and love, camping teaches and models courage, hope, and love. The community, the program, the beauty of the natural surroundings at camp empower and inspire young people to make a positive difference in their own and their fellow beings' future. Surely that is the goal of education.

References

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Notes

1. Please bear in mind that when I speak of the positive outcomes which arise from camping, I mean that these occur in the good camps, which are professionally run, which have educational goals and use well-trained staff to carry out program.
2. The more elaborate version of a theory of camping is presented in Chapter 7 of the research report. The theory addresses the question of how camps nurture positive attitudes and skills and caring social behaviours in youth. The theory, plus your own experiences, is source material for building your own case of why camp works, and what it does differently from school.