

Summer Camps Make Kids Resilient

Sending children to a residential, or day camp, builds resilience

Psychology Today (Posted February 5, 2012)

I recently spoke to 300 camp directors about how to make children more resilient to life [stress](#). Summer camps, we discovered, are perfect places to help children optimize their psychosocial development.

After all, summer camps are places where children get the experiences they need to bolster their range of coping strategies. There are the simple challenges of learning how to build a fire, going on a hike, or conquering a high ropes course. There are the much more complex challenges of getting along with a new group of peers, learning how to ask for help from others, or taking manageable amount of risks without a parent following after you.

The best camping experiences offer these opportunities for manageable amounts of risk and responsibility, what I term "the risk takers advantage" (see my book [Too Safe for Their Own Good](#) for more examples). The worst camps pander to children as if they are entitled little creatures whose parents are paying big sums of money. Children at camp can't be treated like customers if they are going to get anything out of the experience. They need to be treated like students whose caregivers, the counselors, know what the kids need to grow.

Camps that pull this off and make kids, especially teens, put away the makeup, stash the iPods, get a little dirty and even a little frustrated while having fun and making new friends, are the kinds of camps that offer children the best of what they need. Looking at those experiences from the vantage point of my research on [resilience](#), I know that camps help our children develop great coping strategies when they provide seven things all

children need:

- 1) New relationships, not just with peers, but with trusted adults other than their parents. Just think about how useful a skill like that is: being able to negotiate on your own with an adult for what you need.
- 2) A powerful [identity](#) that makes the child feel confident in front of others. Your child may not be the best on the ropes course, the fastest swimmer, or the next [teen](#) idol when he sings, but chances are that a good camp counselor is going to help your child find something to be proud of that he can do well.
- 3) Camps help children feel in control of their lives, and those experiences of [self-efficacy](#) can travel home as easily as a special art project or the pine cone they carry in their backpack. Children who experience themselves as competent will be better problem-solvers in new situations long after their laundry is cleaned and the smell of the campfire forgotten.
- 4) Camps make sure that all children are treated fairly. The wonderful thing about camps is that every child starts without the baggage they carry from school. They may be a geek or the child with dyslexia. At camp they will both find opportunities to just be kids who are valued for who they are. No camps tolerate [bullying](#) (and if they do, you should withdraw your child immediately).
- 5) At camp kids get what they need to develop physically. Ideally, fresh air, exercise, a balance between routine and unstructured time, and all the good food their bodies need. Not that smores (marshmallows, chocolate and graham cracker treats) don't have a place at the campfire, but a good camp is also about helping children find healthy lifestyles.
- 6) Perhaps best of all, camps offer kids a chance to feel like they belong. All those goofy chants and team songs, the sense of common purpose and [attachment](#) to the identity that camps promote go a long way to offering

children a sense of being rooted.

7) And finally, camps can offer children a better sense of their culture. It might be skit night, or a special camp program that reflects the values of the community that sponsors the camp, or maybe it's just a chance for children to understand themselves a bit more as they learn about others. Camps give kids both cultural roots and the chance to understand others who have cultures very different than their own.

That's an impressive list of factors that good camping experiences provide our children. Whether it is a subsidized day camp in a city or a luxurious residential facility up in the mountains, camps can give our kids a spicy combination of experiences that prepare them well for life. Add to that experience the chance for a child's parents to reinforce at home what the child nurtures at camp, and maybe, just maybe, we'll find in our communities and schools amazing kids who show the resilience to make good decisions throughout their lives.

Link: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/nurturing-resilience/201202/summer-camps-make-kids-resilient>

About the Author: Michael Ungar, Ph.D., is a family therapist, a researcher at Dalhousie University, and the author of *Change Your World: The Science of Resilience and the True Path to Success*.