

“NOT MY KID”: UNDERSTANDING CAMP’S SPECIAL POWER TO TRANSFORM CHILDREN

By Dr. Christopher Thurber

My parents love to recount the story of my first overnight camp experience. Well, at least they tell about the parts they witnessed: the drop-off, the pick-up, and the one letter I sent. Naturally, opening day was replete with the usual stressors: last-minute packing, fouled-up driving directions (these were the days before the Internet, Mapquest, and GPS), and a teary goodbye. Closing day was not quite what my parents anticipated. When they drove up to my cabin and leapt out of the car, I famously declared, “Next year, I want to stay all summer!” My mom and dad were expecting another tearful embrace—something out of *Gone With the Wind* probably—but all I could think of was returning to camp. (It’s taken about 25 years to convince my mom that I was glad to see her...it’s just that I had fallen in love with camp.)

My parents fell in love with camp, too, when their son started making his own bed, keeping his elbows off the table, exuding confidence on the sports field, and, yes, dare I say it...getting along with his little brother! Gulp. My parents were dumbfounded. Dad would chide, “This is not my kid!” and my mother would add, “Who are you and what have you done with Chris?” You can understand their surprise as well as their joy. What kind of experience had the power to trump more than a decade of exemplary parenting? (You *know* my parents had tried relentlessly to get me to make my bed and treat my brother with respect.) How did camp accomplish the impossible?

Here’s the deal: Camp (especially overnight camp) has a triad of factors that set it apart from any other experience. It is: (1) community living; (2) away from home; (3) without academic stress. No other experience comes close. Boarding school offers the first two factors, but is academically stressful. Family vacations offer the latter two factors, but lack the benefit of a large community of other children. The local neighborhood may offer a great sense of community and lots of opportunities for recreation, but it’s not an experience away from home.

Now that I’ve convinced you that overnight camp is unique, how exactly does it use its special triad of factors to effect such remarkable change in young people? Well, first of all, not all camps *do* affect remarkable change. Most often, positive growth occurs at the camps with high levels of intentionality. Intentionality is the deliberate process of putting the camp’s mission into action. In other words, high quality camps not only say, “Our camp’s mission is to help kids grow in this way or that way,” they also say, “And here are the ways we do it.” They have a goal *and* a method. Research supports the notion that intentionality is especially important when it comes to increasing children’s self-esteem and spirituality, two particularly intentional parts of a high quality camp’s mission.

Intentionality and the uniqueness of camp come together in some extraordinary ways. Consider the child who gets up on water skis for the first time, the child whose counselor coaches him through a particularly difficult bout of homesickness, the child who is given the responsibility of being a “big sister” or “big brother” to a younger camper, or the child who sneaks contraband into camp, admits to it within hours, and is praised for his honesty. These are but a few examples among thousands of the ways in which *real* accomplishments, *real* perseverance, *real* responsibility, and *real* integrity are cultivated. In the supportive context of community living away from home, without academic stress, such experiences are possible. At the highest quality camps, these experiences are a way of life.

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***The Summer Camp Handbook** is available from any bookstore and through Dr. Thurber's website www.CampSpirit.com*

*This article originally appeared in the Camp Scholar section of MySummerCamps.com
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