

# The Power of the Experience

Peg L. Smith

*The power of the camp experience  
brings us back to nature in a way  
that is intuitive, genuine, and meaningful.*

The camp community has always talked about the “magic” of camp or the “power of the experience.” Those who have experienced camp first-hand or observed the benefits that camp provides others, more often than not, describe the experience as “life saving.” During the American Camp Association’s (ACA’s) most recent **National Board of Directors** meeting, board members introduced themselves by describing their connection to the camp experience. Nearly every national board member described the experience as a “life-saving” or “life-changing” time in their lives. One has to ask after hearing such meaningful and profound stories, why do so few understand the power of the experience, if, in fact, it has accomplished what is described by so many?

I believe we, as a camp community, have difficulty articulating the true benefit of the camp experience beyond the visceral antidotes we all can share when given the stage or platform. We certainly are better than we were ten years ago when asked to express the measurable


outcomes of the experience as a result of our research. Visit [www.ACAcamps.org/research](http://www.ACAcamps.org/research) for details about ACA’s current research efforts. On the other hand, we don’t know how to articulate the power of the experience beyond statistics and stories.

In order to tackle this conundrum, I began by considering the meaning of *power*. I perused J.I. Rodale’s *The Synonym Finder*. I found words such as *ability, potential, what it takes, aptitude, talent, command, influence, mastery, energy, vigor, significance, fitness, and native ability* (Rodale 1978). These are characteristics that I want for my children as well as employees. As I read these words, it is clear to me that these characteristics will support one’s success as an adult, a parent, or an employee. Yet, can we express the power of the camp experience in relevant ways that translate the experience to the characteristics identified?

ACA suggests there are three key elements of the camp experience that resonate with the societal needs that many are lamenting about

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and tomorrow.

today: connection to nature; real, primary relationships with others; and human-powered activity resulting in physical movement. These opportunities can be found in the DNA of the camp experience — an experience that will be 150 years old in 2010. This birthday is important because in the midst of the noisy competitive world, we are not a new, untested “product.” We have value-added benefit to offer in the world of the ever-shrinking dollar. The purchase of a camp experience is money well spent.

### **Nature**

For generations, children have grown up outside. For generations, children have gone to camp in order to experience the outdoors in a shared community designed to maximize a young person’s experiential learning above and beyond the four walls of a classroom. Kids have splashed around in creeks. They have run barefoot in the grass. They have used their energy, wonder, and laughter to experience and

practice life in ways that prepare them for adulthood. It wasn’t that long ago that the thought of being cooped up inside all day long was unfathomable and torturous. For many of us, to be relegated to our room was a form of punishment.

According to a 2005 study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, our nation’s children spend an average of five and a half hours a day plugged into some kind of electronic medium. (TV, videogames, computers, etc.). Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, indicates that society is sending kids a message that: “Nature is the past, electronics are the future, and the bogeyman lives in the woods (Louv 2008).” This is simply unacceptable in a world that needs the next generation to understand the importance and value of a healthy planet. Nature cannot be seen as something scary, only to be viewed on a video, or, worse yet, something to fear because of some impending sense of doom. The “power of the camp experience” can renew one’s native ability to recognize our deep-rooted, human



connection to the natural world. Nature is elemental and, in many ways, intuitive if one is given the opportunity to experience nature first-hand.

A recent study by the National Science Foundation measured individuals' heart recovery rate from minor stress when they were exposed to a natural scene. Subjects were measured viewing nature through a window, shown on a high-definition plasma screen, or staring at a blank wall. Not surprisingly, the heart rate of those looking out the window dropped more quickly than those eyeballing the wall (University of Washington 2008). This is evidence that spending time in nature has a more powerful impact on us than viewing an electronic screen. The power of the camp experience brings us back to nature in a way that is intuitive, genuine, and meaningful.

### Relationships

For generations, young people have been congregating together in order to share experiences and to learn the lessons of life. Play goes hand in hand with the importance of nature and profoundly impacts the development of children and youth. Play is

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not a bad, four-letter word as some seem to treat it as today. The American Academy of Pediatrics says, “Play is essential to development as it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth (Ginsberg 2007).” Play helps children and youth practice command and mastery of new skills and experiences. Play is a form of practicing adulthood. Play is a method to fashion habits, customs, and behaviors. Play allows young people to experience and explore influence and consequences, allowing them to recognize the importance of self-discipline and shared responsibility. These are all elements of “power” to be discovered during a camp

experience because the camp experience is play at its highest form. The *power of the camp experience provides life-long human lessons*. Play is a series of relationships with others as well as the world.

### Human Powered Activity

For generations, children have gone outside to ride their bikes or play with their neighbors. Kids have played tag, climbed trees, and run all over our neighborhoods. Today, children are more likely to play a video game on any given day than to ride a bike. Recent research shows us that the amount of time U.S. children spend outside has declined by 50 percent (National Wildlife Federation 2008) in the last two decades alone. With that kind of evidence, we should not be surprised that more than 9 million children between the ages of six to nineteen are overweight, a number that has tripled since 1980 (Educational Leadership 2005). At the same time, schools have been reducing programs in the arts and physical education. Energy and vigor are essential to good health. The camp experience is a human powered environment designed to promote well-being and positive lifelong wellness habits. *The*

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power of the camp experience is evident in its design and activity. Camp is movement, activity, and using one's body to the best of its ability.

### Memory

Yet, are these lessons of "power" enough in a world that has lost sight of the importance of memory? We have reduced memory to the ability of remembering how to "Google it" or "program it" into our electronic memory chips. Yet, the human brain is the most important computer a child will ever own. We cannot fail to fill their "memory bins" with the poignancy of a close friendship, the soothing impact of staring at the stars twinkle in the darkness of night, or the surge of energy one receives when accomplishing a physical challenge.

### Intensity and Density

Daniel Pink writes in his book, *A Whole New Mind*, that "according to the latest research, IQ accounts for between 4 and 10 percent of career success (Pink 2006)." He suggests that to be successful one must be able to see the big picture, to synthesize what is seen, and understand the meaning in the patterns

**"Camp is movement, activity, and using one's body to the best of its ability."**

discovered. This is not unlike staring up at the vastness of the stars in a dark night and being able to observe the constellations. I believe the power of the camp experience not only rests in our opportunities to provide children and youth experiences with nature, relationships, and physical activity but, more importantly, the power of the camp experience lies in the intensity and density of the moments in camp. Moments that are so powerful they become the memories that allow us to understand the contexts and concepts we must evaluate and assess later in life to be successful. The power of the camp experience brings us back to nature, helps us learn and understand the importance of authentic human relationships, and allows us to use and manage our bodies in ways that support our well-being. *The power of the camp experience may help us*

*preserve all that is human and humane about our world today and tomorrow.*

*Photo on page 37 courtesy of Camp Wilson, Bellfontaine, Ohio.*

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**Peg L. Smith** is the chief executive officer of the American Camp Association. She can be reached at 765-342-8456 or by e-mail at [psmith@ACAcamps.org](mailto:psmith@ACAcamps.org). Visit [www.ACAcampsblog.org](http://www.ACAcampsblog.org) to read Peg's blog.





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