

THE INFLUENCE AND IMPACT OF CAMP

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I honestly believe that we, as camp leaders, are among the most privileged of all professionals. We, more than any others, are in a position to positively influence the development and even the entire lives of children and young people. A good camp experience results in individuals who are more confident, creative, adventurous, co-operative, skilled, self-reliant, tolerant and independent as well as physically, emotionally and spiritually healthier. We improve our campers' communication, social, leadership and physical skills, which in combination build their self-esteem.

Wow! These are very grandiose and impressive claims. Dare we be so confident? Do we really influence and change the lives of children and young people? Yes, we do according to the current research.

In preparation, I read a recent paper by Dr. Stephen Fine, Chair of the Canadian Camping Association/ Association des camps du Canada (CCA/ACC) Research Committee and two current academic theses, both winners of the 2010 Society of Camp Directors Writing Award. The PhD Dissertation written by Anne Warner at the University of Western Ontario is entitled *To Grow in the Open Air, Cultivating Character at Private Ontario Youth Camps*. The Master's Thesis by Kristen Gage at Trent University is titled, *The Effects of Outdoor Green Space and Activities on Children with Special Needs at Summer Camps*. All of this research corroborates these claims.

We are also on the cusp of receiving the results of another considerable body of research undertaken by the University of Waterloo under the leadership of Dr. Troy Glover, which aims at documenting the benefits and lasting effects of the summer camp experience. In 2007, the CCA/ACC began its financial support of this five-year research project. Over two prior summers, interviews with campers, staff and directors resulted in five statements to be tested in summer 2010 in 80 camps across the country. They are currently compiling the results.

The five outcomes to be tested were:

1. Campers experience increased social connections, which lead to greater opportunities, more support and overall, more success in life.
2. Campers are better able to participate and succeed in Canadian culture.
3. Campers experience increased awareness and enjoyment of physical activity, which can lead to more healthy lifestyles throughout life, benefiting both the individual and society.

4. Campers are able to safely take risks and face challenges, resulting in individuals who are more flexible and able to cope with challenges later in life.
5. Campers lead a more environmentally-sustainable lifestyle, reduce their ecological footprint and are environmentally responsible.

Preliminary results appear to support these outcomes. Final results are to be presented at the International Camping Congress in Hong Kong in November of this year.

I promise to share some of the results of these research papers with you as I proceed; however, I prefer to begin supporting the truth of these grand claims by telling you some stories – true stories gathered over the fifty years of my involvement in this business of camping. I have found that story-telling is a very effective teaching tool. Very low tech I admit, but as a camp director for twenty years on an island with no hydro, we learned to teach without dependence on technology. When training staff or doing a chapel program (later renamed Reflections in our non-denominational camp) whenever I said, let me illustrate that with a true story, I observed more focused, sustained attention. True stories are always more interesting than facts and figures while adding relevance and credibility to theory.

Building Relationships at Camp

So let me begin with a true story, which illustrates the first Waterloo outcome, "campers experience increased social connections."

In 2005, I was commissioned to write the story of Camp Tanamakoon, which was founded in 1924 in Algonquin Park by Mary G. Hamilton. My research took me to the archival collections of several university and government libraries, where one was expected to be very serious and solemn. I obediently heeded the printed instructions including, "Please turn the pages of the documentation silently." Much more relaxing and enjoyable were my numerous interviews with current and former campers. One day, I was invited to have lunch in the home of one alumna together with a group of her camp friends. These women, now in their late seventies and early eighties had been meeting regularly since forming friendships at camp in the late thirties and forties. They laughed as they explained that they used to meet in a restaurant in Delisle Court at the corner of Yonge and St. Clair in Toronto. However, the owner finally asked them to please not return. Invariably over lunch, they would burst into song- belting out their camp favourites, every word still

remembered from the days of their youth. I suppose the wine might have had something to do with their exuberance! However, the owner's other patrons were complaining about the noise. So now they meet in one another's homes to laugh, sing and reminisce to their heart's content. These women met at camp and have been fast friends for over sixty years. I am sure each one of you could share a similar story.

Happy, healthy relationships. This is what camp is all about. This is what we do best. On every arrival day in every camp across the country, we initiate relationships between campers then we teach them how to nurture and cement those relationships, many of which bring joy and support for a lifetime. A relationship begins with the simple exchange of names. My four-year-old granddaughter reminded me of this recently on a walk early one evening in December. Together with her two-year-old brother, we were out to admire the Christmas lights in their neighbourhood in Woodinville, a village on the outskirts of Seattle. Everyone we met on our walk was immediately greeted by Finley in a booming voice, "Hi. My name is Finley, what's yours?" People were a bit startled but smiled and responded with their name and in some cases the name of their dog at the end of a leash. Happily for now, there are no strangers in Finley's small, protected world.

If a relationship begins with a name, that addresses the importance of your knowing your campers' names- a daunting task indeed if yours is a large camp. But a challenge well worth tackling. Recently in *The Globe and Mail* there was an article about a woman, voted one of the best school principals in the city of Toronto. One of her merits was she addresses every child in her school by name – all seven hundred of them. I interviewed a nine-year-old camper who told me she visited several camps with her mother before making her choice. She decided on a particular camp because during the tour she was so impressed that the director called every camper by name. Eight hundred children attend this camp each summer.

And, by the way, as well as knowing your campers' names, you need to pronounce them correctly. Nine-year-old Clara reminded me of this. One winter, I was visiting Clara and her family to show them the camp video (pre DVD days). The parents had expressed the concern that although Clara's older sister was at camp, they were not quite sure if Clara was ready. While Clara watched the video, her parents and I chatted in the background. At one point, Clara turned around and asked us (somewhat politely) to be quieter so she could hear – leaving me to conclude that Clara had quite enough confidence to come to camp. The parents decided to register her. On day two of her stay, I was passing her tent and she was sitting on the steps. I asked her, "Carla, how's it going?" My lapse was owing to the fact that a Carla had just vacated that tent two days earlier. Clara looked at me straight in the eye. "My name is Clara, Clara Fraser, spelled C-L-A-R-A." I

didn't make that mistake again. Names, properly pronounced, are important.

Learning hundreds of names is not easy. Start by joining a camper group for lunch or offering to put a group to bed. I read a church message board with a thought-provoking statement: Children spell love T-I-M-E. Aim to spend less time in the office, more time on the camp property and get to know all your campers starting with their names. A leader's influence on campers is in direct proportion to the time spent with them.

Let's start small. Please introduce yourself to the person behind you. Chances are you already know the person sitting beside you. Take two minutes to exchange names then briefly tell your partner the story of your name- why you are called what you are called.

Building Character at Camp

Anne Warner's research identifies that many of the early camp leaders had a background in the YMCA. So it is to be expected that their camp programs were based on "a set of ideals to find meaning in life through the development of Christian values and character." Physical activity at camp was emphasized as central to character development. Former Y leader, Taylor Statten, founder of Camp Ahmek in Algonquin Park, determined the ideal way to build character was through canoe tripping, which promoted physical toughness, self reliance and resourcefulness.

Which brings me to my story about Scott. In 1979, I hired Scott as my first canoe trip leader, to guide camper groups in the Magnetawan River /Georgian Bay area. At 18, he was in his final year of high school and living on his own. His mother had died several years earlier; his father was ill and living in a chronic care hospital and his two younger sisters were in foster care.

My Scottish mother, the camp cook, had a tremendous capacity for love and a lifetime habit of gathering in waifs and strays, so it was natural that she "adopted" Scott.

It was my first year as a director so while mother darned Scott's socks and sweater and liberally heaped second helpings on his plate, I focused on ensuring that Scott had the necessary supplies and equipment for his canoe trips.

We had a tradition at Mi-A-Kon-Da, which I had adopted from the camp where I grew up. As each trip left the front dock, I shook everyone's hand. The handshake was a tacit commitment that each camper would do her best to share the load of the trip. We had discussed their role and responsibilities in a trip meeting the previous evening. I would shake Scott's hand and wish him a good trip. Scott knew I was putting my faith and trust in him and depending on him to do a good job and bring the campers home safely.

Scott did bring every trip home safe, happy and on schedule for the next six summers.

Fast forward, twenty-five years. Scott was now living in Thailand and working as a journalist when the devastating Tsunami struck. He decided to go to Phuket to hopefully find a good news story – a family reunited – a family pet found, but he quickly realized that there were no good news stories amid the horror. So for three days and nights, he volunteered to work with the Red Cross. His job was to separate the native corpses from the tourist corpses to assist the forensic specialists in identifying the victims. He emailed me to describe the horrific experience. The young people he worked with reminded him of the young staff at camp in his tripping days. He wrote, “I kept going despite the stench and horror because I remembered the handshake. You had faith that I could do the job then. So I knew I had to persevere and do this job now.”

Scott’s strength of character and commitment to duty were nurtured at camp. Sometimes you learn about the impact of what you do at camp. Sometimes you don’t know about the ripple effect that grows from something as simple as a handshake.

Letters, received by Heather Macdonald, the director of Camp Tidnish, an Easter Seals Camp in Nova Scotia for adults, teens and children with physical disabilities and cognitive delays, leave no doubt about the tremendous impact of camp. Chad, a 26 year old camper with Down syndrome, wrote this:

I go to camp for past 11 years and like it because: I help the workers – it makes me feel important; eat treats like chips and pizza and drink pop; meet new friends and see old friends; can go to camp without Mom and Dad; I feel safe at camp. Would be very sad if I could not go to camp every year. It is my favourite place to be.

Kim took great care in writing her letter. She is 27 with mild cognitive delay.

I feel lucky when I get to go to camp. Camp people don’t judge me. They treat me as an equal. Camp changed my life because it taught me to love other people and myself.

This is powerful stuff!

Parents writing to the Tim Horton Foundation are equally enthusiastic about the impact of camp. “My daughters came home with such a positive outlook on life. They learned how to overcome fears and try new tasks.” And, “Camp was the best experience of my son’s life. It gave him more confidence. He felt more responsible. He felt he was part of this big family.” And another mother describes her son’s experience, “He has a lot more confidence in himself and he is more helpful. He has stepped up as a role model to his younger siblings and cousins.”

A young camper, Brook, wrote a most insightful letter. “I’ve learned that life is about creating yourself. I only

made it up to the first knot in the Tango Tower, but at least I made it up.”

And from an older participant,

During my summer as a counsellor, I really learned who I was and what I want to do with my life. When I first stepped off the bus at Parry Sound over nine years ago, I was a shy, insecure girl who did not believe in herself. Six years later, I was a strong, independent, self-assured young woman. Camp taught me that challenging yourself is important and that sometimes you fail and need to try again.

Privilege and Responsibility

I began by describing our great privilege as camping leaders to influence the lives of others - sometimes in small ways, sometimes profoundly. We know that with this great privilege comes an even greater responsibility – to do our job well and to thoroughly train those whom we rely on to help us to do our job. As a director, six days a week, I spent an hour each morning working with my Counsellors in Training. It was important to me to spend that time instilling our camp philosophy on my future counsellors. Early in the season, I did a session on the relationship between privilege and responsibility. CITs acquired certain privileges such as determining their own bedtime and enjoying a half day off. But I stressed that with these privileges came the responsibility to discipline themselves to get adequate sleep to do their job well, to use their free time wisely and if off the property, to behave in a manner that reflected well on the camp.

If **what** we do is influence the lives of young people in a variety of positive ways, I think it would be helpful to look closely at just **how** we do it.

Camp is for the campers!

It is our mandate to focus all our attention, resources and energies on our campers.

Unlike parents who have to also earn a living and run a household or teachers who are obligated to deliver a curriculum, we can concentrate all our efforts on our campers. We do teach skills, but camp activities are a means to an end not an end in themselves – campers learn how to canoe, sail, kayak, but what we are also teaching is co-operation, tenacity, respect for others, self-reliance and independence.

I was privileged to learn the business of camp under the wise leadership of Elizabeth Raymer, the second director of Camp Tanamakoon. Throughout precamp training and in daily counsellor meetings throughout the season, we heard the phrase repeated time and time again, Camp is for the campers!

From the moment a camper arrives on your property, you are delivering the message, loud and clear: We have worked to prepare the site and ourselves for your arrival. We eagerly awaited your arrival. You are most welcome. We are happy you are here. We will care for

you. We will keep you safe. We will love you as you are. Together, we will have lots of fun. You belong here.

A few years ago, I was working on a project that necessitated my touring the sites of several Ontario camps. Inadvertently, I arrived at one camp on arrival day. Several staff were in the parking lot greeting parents and campers. The director was nowhere to be seen. I held back, not wanting to interrupt the counsellors in their task. During a lull in the proceedings, I learned that the director was in her office dealing with a maintenance issue. I then observed as one young camper dragged her luggage, by herself, across a field, on a hot summer's day presumably in the direction of her living quarters. I was not surprised to learn that this camp closed two years later.

Think about your arrival procedure. What are the first steps you take to demonstrate a sincere welcome? A parent interviewed by researcher, Kristen Gage, reported, "Camp gives my child a sense of belonging, a creation of community, a building of friendships, and the growth of self-esteem and learned skills from peers."

Take one minute to exchange with your neighbour what happens in the first thirty minutes after a camper arrives on your property.

Positive Change at Camp

The supportive environment at camp can be an instrument of change in a person's life. Michael Brandwein, an American camp professional, who has trained staff in every state and most provinces, describes the role of camp staff; "we are here to change people in positive ways." Children can learn and do change.

Melanie was a camper with us for only one summer. She had a very sad history. Her mother had died when she was very young. Her father remarried and her step mom died a few years later. Her dad now had a new partner with a daughter also called Melanie. Understandably, Melanie was very sad, angry and felt as if she now had to compete for her father's love with the other Melanie. Consequently, she was not a very happy camper. When things didn't go her way, she would kick and swear at her tent mates.

After one such outburst, I took her tent mates aside while her counsellor spoke with Melanie. Without too much detail, I explained to the group why Melanie was so angry and lashed out at them as she did. I asked them what could they do to help. One sensitive young camper said, "we could be her friend. I could ask her to be my buddy for swimming." A few days later, I saw Melanie sitting on the side of the path behind her tent by herself. I asked her if everything was OK. She answered, "Yea. Everything's fine. I'm just cooling down by myself the way Jessica told me." Such is the effect of a loving counsellor.

And another story that illustrates the power of a caring, camp environment. Back to 1979. We had just purchased Camp Mi-A-Kon-Da and I was preparing for my first year as a director. Despite letters, persuasive phone calls and pizza parties, I could not persuade one single staff person from the previous summer to return. Things had not gone well with the old owner and directors and everyone was bailing. I needed to build an entire camp staff from scratch. So I invited a friend, Susan, a former teacher, now at home raising her two children, to head up the Arts and Crafts program. Having recently separated from an alcoholic husband, who had maxed out all their credit cards before departing, camp offered a temporary reprieve from a challenging future.

I had no idea of how much camp meant to Susan until this past fall, 31 years later. On a visit to our cottage, which is located across the bay from camp now owned by my former camp nurse and her husband, Susan asked if we could paddle across to the camp island. She explained that a return visit to camp was on her bucket list – one of the things she wanted to do before she died. As we walked the silent paths past the empty tent platforms covered in the red and gold leaves of autumn, Susan recalled her three summers at camp. Her work was fun and appreciated; her children were cared for and her own needs were met. The young, carefree staff helped her to forget her worries for the moment. She gained the strength and perspective to put her life back in order. Such is the power of camp.

Benefits of a natural environment

According to the research, another reason for our success at camp requires very little effort on our part – it is something very basic – simply, we function for the most part outdoors. Anne Warner and Kristen Gage both address this factor in their research papers.

Historically camp directors realized the benefit of being outdoors in a natural setting. They believed that the wilderness is the place where we can see the world as it is and so know ourselves as we really are – or ought to be. They described moving from the prose of the city with its noise, fumes, rush and concrete to the poetry of the wilds and simple, colourful things. The city is a prison; the wilderness is freedom. In the early 20th century, camp founders were escaping the evils of modernism, industrialization and urbanization. Today we can add technology and a sedentary lifestyle to the list. Taylor Statten described Algonquin Park as "a cure for most real and all fancied ills."

At a time when children's experiences in nature are rapidly declining, research is proving that contact with nature is as important to a child's healthy development as good nutrition and adequate sleep. Exposure to green space has desirable benefits. It decreases stress, increases attention span, helps children to learn, facilitates social interactions and encourages physical activity. Typically today, children's lives are

more structured, programmed and sedentary. There is little if any time for spontaneous play outdoors. Outdoors is often deemed unsafe without adult supervision and parents are often too busy to provide that oversight resulting in more indoor play. In 2009, Strife and Downey writing about special needs children state, "exposure to nature has physical, mental, emotional and cognitive benefits that not only buffer the symptoms of disorders but positively affect children's overall development."

Studies have found that with all demographic factors remaining constant, people residing in urban areas are 17% more likely to feel unhealthy than people living in rural areas.

Robert Louv in his book , *Last Child in the Woods*, published in 2005, coined the phrase, "nature deficit disorder" which is the result of reduced exposure to nature and the resulting health consequences associated with a lack of outdoor experience. He challenges camp leaders to focus their attention on offering more experiences with direct contact to nature.

Sue Humphries, an educator at Coombes Primary School in southern England, over four decades, created a school playground that looks like an arboretum with narrow paths snaking past apple, willow and walnut trees, a pond, two labyrinths and a garden from a once barren yard. Humphries was ahead of her time. "Attention restoration theory" is the term used to describe how nature helps children to learn. In a recent experiment, Dr Berman at Michigan State found that undergraduates did better on attention and memory tests after a stroll through an arboretum than a walk through downtown Ann Arbor. Some studies show that even looking out the window at green space can be cognitively restorative. Frances Kuo at the University of Illinois is studying whether the improved test scores in 100 schools is linked to the addition of trees, shrubs and gardens to their grounds over the past ten years. She reports that her initial findings are promising. Most camps have this ideal learning environment without planting more trees. Although having said that it is great that last summer 10,000 trees were planted in forty-seven camps in nine provinces.

So here's the next question, what are you now doing at camp indoors, which could be relocated outdoors? Take a minute to discuss this with another partner.

My final story, which illustrates a key message for camp directors: keep your sense of humour; never take yourself too seriously.

If my information from your conference planners is correct, many of you are leaders in Christian camps and likely part of your mandate is religious training. I have a granddaughter who lives in Kamloops. Her mother, my daughter, attended the United Church as a

child, her father is a lapsed Catholic but as a family they rarely go to church. However a couple of summers ago, when Makaila was six, a neighbour's child invited her to attend day Bible Camp for two weeks and Makaila happily agreed. Into the middle of the second week, her four-year-old brother asked her at the dinner table, "So what do you do at camp?" Makaila answered, "Well, we play games, do crafts, hear stories about Jesus and sing songs about Jesus." Which prompted Quintin, whose world is either black or white to ask, "So this Jesus guy. Is he a good guy or a bad guy?" To which Makaila answered, "I don't know. I've haven't met him yet." Makaila still has much to learn as do all of the campers at your camps. Have fun doing what you do best – teaching, loving and influencing in positive ways the lives of the children and youth in your camps.

References:

To Grow in the Open Air, Cultivating Character at Private Ontario Youth Camps. Anne Warner, University of Western Ontario, PhD Dissertation available on Society of Camp Directors (SCD) Website

The Effects of Outdoor Green Space and Activities on Children with Special Needs at Summer Camps. Kristen Gage, Trent University, Master's Thesis available on SCD Website

Last Child in the Woods, Richard Louv

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