

Camp's Secret Weapon: The Buzz About Emotional Intelligence and Your Child

By Posie Taylor

Why consider summer camp for your child? Perhaps you hope to raise another Michelle Kwan or Tiger Woods. Maybe you are desperate for an alternative to a summer of day care, chauffeuring, and video games. There is another even more compelling reason to consider a high-quality summer camp according to the child development experts at the American Camp Association. This reason, while it has been true for decades, is finally getting the attention it deserves. Children at summer camps are learning vital life skills that will help them grow – and will make their lives healthier and happier all along the way. It's the new buzz word in educational theory that's been at work in quality summer camps for years: Emotional Intelligence.

Jeremy and Tony are excited to go fishing. Their counselor helps them to work out a way to share the one rod fairly without arguing. Their new-found ability to share without anger carries over to their cabin and who will operate the only working flashlight.

Sarah's nature counselor watches with delight to see this shy nine-year-old gently and competently organize her camp friends into teams for a wildflower search. At the beginning of camp, Sarah was too nervous even to express an opinion about whether she preferred hot dogs or burgers on the grill.

Matthew and Valerie watch out for Robert as he maneuvers the climbing wall. They yell encouragement, cheering on their camp friend, who, unlike his cabinmates, struggles daily with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. On Opening Day, these two teased Robert about his unstable walk and slow progress across the field. Cabin discussions about disabilities, a counselor's careful example of kindness and respect, and just spending time together have helped the three form a strong friendship.

Emotional Intelligence: Nature or Nurture?

These children all demonstrate sophisticated skills in areas scientists are suddenly watching closely. Observers are finding that a set of abilities, collectively called Emotional Intelligence, has much to do with how children grow and succeed. These skills – self-awareness, self-control, empathy, the ability to wait (delayed gratification), the ability to listen, cooperate, share, and work well with others – are actually better predictors of adult success and happiness than traditional IQ scores. In *Emotional Intelligence*, clinical psychologist and author Daniel Goleman, makes two important assertions, assertions that parents may not find surprising. He reports on new research showing that children whose Emotional Intelligence skills are well-developed tend to be more successful at school, have deeper and healthier relationships, grow up to have more fulfilling work lives, and become valuable and contributing members of their communities.

Goleman's second assertion is that these Emotional Intelligence skills can be *taught*. Children can learn and practice these wonderfully valuable qualities under the guidance of thoughtful and aware adults – parents, teachers, and youth leaders of all sorts. The importance of this assertion is hard to overemphasize. Parents have long tried to teach courtesy and politeness to their children, but were never sure their teaching could overcome inborn capabilities. Certain life skills seemed innate in kids – like the traditional IQ, children seemed to be born with certain levels of ability in these areas. Parents and teachers have assumed that the patience children display naturally is probably most of the patience they can muster, or that they are good or bad sharers, gentle friends or playground bullies from birth. A group of researchers, led by Howard Gardner, a psychologist at the Harvard School of Education, have proved otherwise. They have shown that thoughtful teaching, conversation, modeling, and practice can develop and nurture these skills, especially when that teaching is consistent throughout a child's day and year.

The evidence is clear! There are ways to help kids grow up to be the happy and productive people parents hope they will be. And summer camp is a vital part of the puzzle.

Real Challenges Build Resiliency

The best-kept secret in American education is that great camps have been teaching Emotional Intelligence since they began. Besides their long years of practice in this arena, camps have another edge. Because camps are free of the demands of curriculum and academic testing, camp professionals can focus on those intangibles that are part of the Emotional Intelligence cluster.

Children away from home, with new friends and the new challenges of camp can learn much about themselves, their own strengths, and abilities. Perhaps the canoe doesn't head where it should at first, or a cabin-mate is unwilling to be friendly. Away from the familiarity of home and school, campers can test their own perseverance, and, with caring and thoughtful help, build new life skills for themselves. Meeting these challenges brings true self-esteem, the kind that is earned, not empty words. Talking about self-esteem or trying to bolster it in kids does not work without real challenge in safe and supportive communities.

Social skills, too, grow exponentially at camp. A campfire marshmallow roast is an exercise in sharing of sticks and the front row around the campfire. When campers take turns carrying the lunch to the top of the mountain, they learn firsthand how wonderful working together can be. A good counselor will gently remind her young hikers of this lesson, not later, but during the climb, when the message is fresh.

Timing is Everything When Life Lessons Are Involved

Counselors at camp teach archery or pottery or swimming while showing children the value of the varied skills and talents of their friends. And, with no formal "curriculum," a lesson may be "interrupted" for a chat about sharing or about any of the Emotional Intelligence skills when the time is right.

Parents are amazed at the clear progress their campers make during even a relatively short time at camp. Given that Emotional Intelligence *is* at the very heart of the camp experience, this progress is not surprising. A parent of a ten-year-old boy comments in a camp evaluation: “Living in such close quarters was not without its challenges for Roger, but he is much more able to handle social challenges at school since his return. And he came home just generally a *nicer* boy in all respects.” Another explains: “Of course I am glad my girls had fun and learned some new skills, but their new-found maturity and caring for each other was really what I had hoped would happen.”

Teachable Moments at Camp

Summer camps work hard to train staff in modeling and teaching Emotional Intelligence skills. Camp directors hire staff with strengths in these areas over candidates who are merely athletes or coaches. Camp counselors can be wonderful role models for children. They are often closer in age than teachers, and the informal atmosphere of camp encourages relaxed conversations at picnics or getting ready for bed. Then, too, there are usually more counselors with the children than in a regular classroom, allowing more interaction than one lone hard-working teacher can possibly supply. Every one of these interactions is a potential teaching moment for essential life skills.

When children find adult friends at camp who model perseverance, listening, teamwork, and appreciation of differences, they set new and high standards for their own behavior. When they feel appreciated and valued by these friends, they are surer of their ability to live happily away from home. Successful camp summers can help smooth the transition to college in later years.

Camp is a key opportunity for growth, both for children who thrive at school and for those who struggle. Talented students develop their abilities to cooperate and share in a community where they don't worry about grades and academic competition. Children whose school lives are difficult find real rewards in new opportunities to shine. Having a chance to practice being a leader may be a rare experience for them indeed!

At summer camp, children learn from trained and thoughtful counselors. They talk about Emotional Intelligence every day and hone their skills in a safe and nurturing community. Children at camp know firsthand the value of cooperation and teamwork, and they practice listening, sharing, and waiting their turn every day.

Emotional Intelligence Lessons: After Camp and Beyond

When campers return home from camp, parents can help them keep building their summer skills throughout the year. Chores are often a great teaching opportunity at home, for example. Parents who model working together as a family to get jobs done are reinforcing vital lessons from camp.

Empathy means recognizing others' needs, literally "feeling with" another person. Television reports are full of stories of children who have not been taught to empathize, children who become bullies or delinquents or worse. Parents can use these same TV reports as teaching moments about caring and sympathy.

Parents can also make sure that teachers and caregivers understand the importance of teaching Emotional Intelligence skills. Do teachers, for example, set up such strong competition in their classrooms that kids don't feel encouraged to care about their friends? Do coaches reward only the most aggressive players and talk of winning at all costs?

Parents who build a year-round program to teach Emotional Intelligence skills to their kids will find the lessons reinforce each other in wonderful ways. And summer camps, where these lessons have been taught for years, are a key part of the reinforcement. With the spotlight finally where it belongs, on Emotional Intelligence, the best-kept secret in American education, the quality summer camp, will not be a secret much longer!

To learn more about camp and child development, please visit the American Camp Association's family Web site: www.CampParents.org.

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