

## **The freedom of nature camps**

By Jane Whiting

Lately, much has been written on the subject of over-protective parenting. The message is that too many kids today are being deprived of the benefits of unsupervised play, going outside and getting dirty, forgetting stuff, and making minor mistakes. As a result, they are at risk of becoming too sedentary as well as missing out on learning critical lessons about natural consequences and taking responsibility for their behaviour or actions.

One ideal way of allowing children a safe escape from too much bubble-wrapping is for them to go to summer camp. The well-documented benefits of a traditional camp experience are that it helps to foster a range of important life skills which includes encouraging a strong element of independence. Add that to a camp with a focus on outdoor activities, and the advantages increase to include physical exercise, healthy living and the importance of connecting to the natural environment.

With major concerns in North America about childhood obesity and urban lifestyles that reduce exposure to the natural world, there is a growing movement to get back to the land. Nature camps are becoming a popular choice, with the Canadian and American Camping Associations promoting the value of outdoor educational experiences with farming and gardening camps to wilderness and experiential nature camps.

In a Canadian Camping Association publication, a former Ontario camper, counsellor and program director talks about her tree planting initiative. She supplies free tree seedlings to camps that commit to a planting program and calls them Wish Trees, because she says, “When a child plants a tree, a very meaningful and powerful experience, they get to make a wish for the planet.” At another Ontario camp for girls, the owner/director built a “living” classroom into the base of a rocky hill. After research into alternative energy research, the unique building is designed to be completely sustainable and equipped to teach campers about heating, alternative lighting, alternative energy and other aspects of green living.

“Camp is the perfect place to teach children to be good stewards of our planet and how to act responsibly for the sake of future generations,” says the camp owner.

On the website for the Ontario Camps Association, a camp director compares the differences between taking kids to the family cottage versus sending them off to summer camp. While both provide children with a happy, carefree enjoyment of the great outdoors, the camp experience is better at teaching children to accept and appreciate diverse lifestyles, religions, cultures, abilities or disabilities. It builds self-esteem and the joy of independence, in a secure, supportive environment.

The American Camp Association emphasizes how camps teach kids to think green with programs that instil healthy eating practices as well as a lasting appreciation for nature and a lifelong interest in caring for the earth. In *Children and Nature Belong Together – Leave No Child Inside*, the ACA claims that more American camps are encouraging children not to overeat by only putting on their plates what they will eat. Then they are taught about recycling by converting the leftovers into compost which is used to fertilize the fields that create food for the campers. Some camps are also implementing an environmental awareness program that teaches and encourages children to clean up after themselves, so as to not pollute the natural environment, and many are getting down and dirty to teach young people about the environment, with an up-close study of ecology that involves actually getting into ponds and examining the ponds' aquatic life.

Other ACA camps create educational programs with local wildlife agencies or feature marine science programs, as well as offering campers opportunities to learn about healthy forests through replanting activities and spending extended time in wooded areas and camp forests. While many would consider a traditional camp experience to be an escape from technology, the digital world, and even electricity, the ACA explains that some camps are actually on the forefront of technology, such as those that take part in revolutionary waste water treatment centres to purify the water and create wetland systems.

To discover more about the natural gifts of the camping experience and to explore all the possibilities, check out the guide to summer camps in *Capital Parent*. For further information on local and provincial camps contact the Ontario Camps Association and go online to visit a summer camp that will offer your children an opportunity to pursue an active and outdoor lifestyle that will let them learn about the natural world, while they also acquire a few social and physical survival skills to steer them towards a healthy and self-reliant lifestyle.

*This article originally appeared in the April 2010 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper*