

**Camp Isn't What It Used To Be Increasingly, Kids Getting Hands-On Expertise In Fashion, Acting, Even Cinematography**

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PHOTO 1: CLEMENTINE COSTELLE, above left, a camper from Paris, and Sarah MacNamara, a counselor, work on a film at the School of Cinema & Performing Arts in Los Angeles. At left, a photo taken by a camper at the performing arts school's New York City camp. PHOTO 2: JENNA ROSSI does a dive roll over Tyler Sheil, 11, during a rehearsal of the Children's Circus of Middletown, a summer circus camp sponsored by the Oddfellows Playhouse and Middletown Commission on the Arts.

So maybe your children aren't enamored of the great outdoors; perhaps it's not the hiking trail that beckons but the catwalk.

One option: Send them to Fashion Camp NYC.

"For five days we talk about the retail fashion business," says camp founder Gordon Josey. For instance, they explore how a shoe goes from concept to design to the window display of Saks 5th Avenue. There's no official song, but campers will design their own "Fashion Camp NYC" T-shirts. "We really want our campers when they leave to have an insight into the world of retail fashion."

Maybe that's not your kids' thing either. Don't worry. There's also filmmaking camp, DNA forensics camp, SAT preparation camp. There's really no limit. Think of some narrowly aimed interest, add the word "camp," and there's a good chance it exists somewhere. Baking camp, video-game-design camp, puppet-making camp ...

Whatever happened to plain old camp, tucked away in the woods, with beat-up cots and a hard-to-pronounce name? Have we, perhaps, stretched the definition of "camp" too far? Will our youth, decades hence, reminisce not of gliding along a lake in a canoe but of penciling in bubbles on a practice SAT test?

So wonders Chick BeVier, founder of Camp Eagle Wing in Rocky Hill. For more than 30 years, BeVier has run the old-fashioned kind of camp; your child won't return speaking Mandarin but will get the kind of life lessons that come only from spending time in the rugged outdoors.

"Camp is like a joke -- you had to be there to get it," he says. "When you speak to parents who were campers themselves, they know exactly what you mean. Parents who didn't, it takes a lot of time to explain it to them."

Something of a camp historian, BeVier traces the start of camp as we know it to Connecticut, specifically Frederick and Abigail Gunn in 1861, who also ran the Gunnery school in Washington, Conn. It's a uniquely American tradition, and BeVier says it's important that we maintain it.

"If all I do is teach to play an instrument or make a pot," he says, "that's not camp. It's something else. It may be very valuable, but it's a very different thing from camp."

Niche camps have blossomed in a time when parents fret over how their children will stack up against their peers. ``That's a cultural phenomenon going on in the country now," he says. ``We want tangible results right now. That's a very American thing."

On the other hand, some say, 1861 was a long time ago -- back when hiking and canoeing were essential for getting around. Who's to say spending two weeks learning nanotechnology or website design -- can't also be character-building, not to mention more practical?

Even without the horseback riding and ghost stories, an SAT preparation program can still offer the fundamentals of camp, says Cielle Taaffe at Education Unlimited. The California company runs several academic-oriented camps (college prep camp, creative writing camp, public speaking camp, etc.) throughout the United States. The campers stay in college dorms, she says, but they're learning independence and making new friends.

``They're not in cabins, and they don't have the lake, but kids still have that camp mentality," she says. ``They're away from home, they're meeting new people and there's hugs and tears at the end, which I think is the important part of camp."

She cheerfully admits that an SAT preparation camp ``sounds kind of horrible for the summer." But three months off from school is a long time, and their camps keep students' brains from atrophying over the summer. And with scavenger hunts and field trips, Taaffe says, the camp makes learning fun.

Many of the specialty camps make it a point to include some of the old-fashioned activities. That's why Variations, a dance studio in New York, moved its ``Broadway Bound" camp to a lakeside property in Kent. Besides dance and voice lessons and trapeze class, they also have water sports and other pursuits.

``We'll have evening films, campfire activities and karaoke to keep them busy, though I think they'll be exhausted by that time," says Elizabeth Parkinson, a Tony-award nominee who will help run the camp with her husband Scott Wise, another Broadway performer.

It seems each decade brings with it a new crop of specialty camps. Computer camps started showing up in the 1980s, while rock 'n' roll camps first appeared in the 1990s. This may be the decade of filmmaking camps. Filmmakers Ink runs seven camps in Connecticut and one in Amherst, Mass. Students learn about story arcs and mise en scene over one-week or two-week programs. The staff includes a protege of Akira Kurosawa.

Filmmakers Ink founder Patrick McCollough sees the proliferation of specialty camps as a good thing.

``I think what I've found is that parents want their kids to try a lot of different things," he says. ``One year it's film; another year it's making video games. It varies."

But make no mistake, specialty camps can be pricey. Fashion Camp costs \$1,095 per child for one week, and that doesn't include room and board (Josey hopes to provide dormitories next year). That's part of the cost of doing business in Manhattan, Josey says. ``'Fashion Camp New Rochelle' doesn't hold the same appeal as `Fashion Camp NYC.'"

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