

Summertime and the Livin' Is Easy

By Dr. Christy D. McGee, Chair, Parent and Community Network

When I think of summer, I always think of the opera *Porgy and Bess* and in particular, the song “Summertime.” During my elementary years, I sang that song with my friend Bonna in talent shows so I have loved it for long time. As a child, my summers were full of adventures. I rode my bike all over our town and surrounding hills and valleys. I left the house early in the morning and usually did not return until supper. Those were glorious days of pretending, exploring, learning about the woods, and building tree houses. I watched some television, but frankly the three stations available had little programming that would interest an elementary-school-aged child. I read, and read,

and read. Reading was also a wonderful escape into another world of adventure for me. There were no planned play dates—the children in my neighborhood just got together. We created magical imaginary worlds. We didn’t require a lot of toys or gadgets because we invented all of the “stuff” we needed from common, everyday items. We also went to our pool on most days and many of us were not supervised by adults when we were there. We had a sense of freedom that children today are lacking.

Even when my children were young, I could allow them to ride their bikes in our neighborhood. I didn’t have to arrange play dates—kids just showed up at each other’s homes. They did have some free-



dom to just be children. There were far more television channels available, but again, most did not have programming suitable for children during the day. My children read, read, and read and loved getting lost in books. They were not distracted by myriads of electronic toys—except for Pac-Man (which first appeared in 1980) so, like their mother, they created games to play. My children had adventures with their neighborhood friends, but were never too far from an adult eye.

Twenty-first century summers are different. Most children are shuttled to and from arranged play dates. Children go to pools, but they are supervised by parents or babysitters. For some children, everything is structured to the hilt, while others are left to their own devices, which often means they have their noses in front of an electronic game or the television channel that runs children's programming all day long. I realize that there are many learning games on electronic devices, but those interactions are different than participating in experiences that causes them to wonder and learn deeply.

One way to extend learning opportunities for children is for parents to create their own camp experiences. Even parents who work can hold evening camps. Home-based camps can be a wonderful family experience for older and younger siblings alike. Here are some steps to help plan and prepare a great family camp.

Step 1: Explore the child's interest area. If the child assists in the planning, discern what areas of interest he or she would like to explore. Once a topic is decided upon, give it a great name to emphasize both the topic and the idea this is a structured activity (e.g., The Night Sky, Folktales/Ghost Stories, A Writer's Den, Kitchen Chemistry, Poetry Slams, The Human Body, Botany Bash, Rocket Science, Dinosaur Dig, Bugs Galore, Zoo Time Fun).

Step 2: Think about logistics. In order for a family camp to work, a schedule must be followed. Camp leaders need to decide days and times and then stick to them. Think about incorporating the evening meal into the camp experience by deciding on menus that enhance the experience. Giving the menu items names that relate to the camp topic adds to the fun. Another great addition to the home camp is allowing children to sleep outside. There are few things that children love more than sleeping in a tent—even if it is in the backyard.

Step 3: Research and prepare. Now is the time to search the Internet for great activities, science experiments, guidebooks for identification of phenomenon, and so forth. The public library also has a wealth of books on a variety of subjects to support a camp. Don't forget that it is possible to include local attractions as a part of the camp experience. For example, including a zoo or park trip changes the pace of the home camp and can add interest. Many public venues (e.g., zoos, museums, state parks) have websites that provide educational suggestions to enhance visits.

Step 4: Select and plan activities. Featuring two or three activities per evening works well, especially if dinner is included

as part of the camp. (One note of caution is to make sure that any selected experiments are tried in advance.) Try to incorporate reading and writing in your camp. For example, having children keep a detailed protocol of their experiments shows them the importance of documenting their work. Reflective journals can be very enlightening for parents to read and children to write. Having children discuss their feelings during camp can give parents a great deal of insight into how their children think and feel.

Step 5: Gather all needed supplies. Individual lists are necessary for the daily planning of the camp activities. As a teacher, I always used a sticky note for the supplies needed for each activity so that in the heat of the moment I could quickly get each student the proper supplies.

Step 6: Execute the camp. As a teacher, I learned to overplan for each day's activities and that is a great practice to incorporate into camp planning. The daily organization and implementation of the camp is critical to success. Remember not to rush through activities; camp is a time to savor spending time together and exploring new ideas. It is also important to set up some camp rules, particularly when dealing with any type of experiment or expensive equipment. Attitude is everything; so camp leaders should go into the camp experience excited and ready to learn and have fun. If more than one camper is involved, it is a great opportunity to allow the children to work together to finish each project.

Conclusion

The pluses of having at-home camps are many. First, a camp allows families to spend much-needed time together. Shared activities and experiences are so vital to maintaining communication and unity. Second, camp activities can expand the gifted child's area of interest. Many gifted children go through phases when they become immersed in their current interest. Camp is a great way to show support and assist them in developing that interest. Third, for campers who struggle to find motivation, camp can be a way to get them back on track and to love learning again. Finally, camp can accelerate the depth of content and expand critical thinking skills. Gifted children may ask hard questions and find logical thinking strategies intriguing. Happy camping! ☺

Author's Note

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