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How a Week in the Outdoors Can Benefit Kids

By Lloyd Mattson

There was a time when the plaintive call came often, "What's there to do, Mom?" You seldom hear that anymore.

Before kids are barely out of diapers, they are bombarded with compelling opportunities for amusement. Little mites scurry about on ice rinks and soccer fields followed by rabid parent fans. The teams sport expensive uniforms. Soccer moms have become a voting bloc. Kid sports' grip on the nation is amazing.

Sports get kids outdoors, teach teamwork, build friendships, and burn energy, but there's another grip on kids that's scary.

A friend recently commented, "Last Saturday I drove through an upscale new development with fine homes, textured lawns, curving streets, a pool, and a fenced play area bristling with colorful gizmos. Suddenly it struck me: I couldn't see a kid! Not one."

Millions of kids, young and old, no longer live in the world of bikes and playgrounds. Imprisoned in their virtual world, they bounce and weave to iPod tunes and hover over garish monitors, addicted to noisy digital input foisted on them by a multi-billion dollar industry.

Is this a cranky, old-fogy exaggeration? I hope so. But if this apparent digital enslavement worries you, consider a happy alternative: a week at camp.

Don't imagine you can suddenly haul a load of digitalized kids to camp. You must apply a soccer mom's dedication to building an appetite for camp. Family involvement in a youngster's early years will do that. Considering the values Christian camping offers, that involvement will become increasingly vital.

To say kids have lost interest in camping misses the point. A kid who has never seen an ice rink will not be interested in hockey, but when Dad gives Junior a puck for a teething ring, hockey interest will follow.

Family values Christian camping offers include:
• Safety: Careful staff screening and training weed out people unfit to serve. Camps work constantly to assure physical, moral, and spiritual safety for

campers. Government regulations reinforce the camp's efforts. A typical youth camp provides about one staff member for every three campers, with trained counselors guiding cabin groups.

• Friendship: Friends are one of the most vital forces for shaping a child's character, and camps create an environment where friendships form and grow. Campers encourage kids to share adventure with peers from diverse backgrounds over five or six days under spiritual guidance, allowing friendships to mature.

• Self-discovery: The overpowering sights and sounds of the digital world stifle personal reflection and creativity, while the camp's natural setting and challenging programs create moments for self-awareness and creative thought.

• Spiritual input: Christian camps present the gospel through chapel services, Bible study groups, counselor-led sharing times, and campfires, providing opportunities for campers to make spiritual choices and receive counseling.

• Role models: The home church brings kids and leaders together for an hour or two of directed activity in a religious setting. At camp, kids and leaders interact constantly in worship, play, adventure, discovery, and meals—the stuff of daily life. In this setting, the friendship of older Christians makes a great impact.

• Creation: Our world of wire and concrete dulls the spirit to the wonders of the nature. Many youngsters spend most of their hours indoors, going out only to move from one indoor place to the next. Camps feature the natural setting. Campfire worship, nature hikes, outpost overnights, and week-long out trips bring campers close to creation. The near presence of forest, field, hill, and lake stirs campers' hearts. The heavens do declare the glory of God.

• Change of pace: Within the camp's full schedule are pockets of leisure that provide the camper with breathing room. Away from the distractions common to life at home, and immersed in a Christian community, campers often find new life perspectives. The Christian life at home takes on the appearance of a group activity engineered by leaders, but God's Spirit always deals with hearts one on one. Camp often provides the stillness that is mandated in Scripture: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10).

• Leadership growth: The camp, more than any other Christian agency, provides openings for entry-level leadership experience. Most camp leaders

once were campers. A significant percentage of Christian leaders first tasted leadership in a camp and trace their sense of calling to a camp experience.

• Fair price: Remembering their camp years, parents may wonder at today's camp fees. The answer lies in the cost of today's homes, cars, professional sporting events tickets, and dinners out. Considering the benefits one week at camp offers kids, the fee represents an overwhelming value.

Lloyd has served as a camp director and pastor, and has written or edited 28 books about Christian camping, including Christian Camping Today (The Wordshed).

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