

## **Emotional Intelligence and Summer Camp**

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In 2006, the University of Waterloo embarked on a six year study (*Canadian Summer Camp Research Project - CSCR*) in order to discover how camps across Canada may contribute to youth development. The study identified five areas of positive growth: 1) attitudes toward physical activity, 2) emotional intelligence, 3) social integration and citizenship, 4) personal development and self-confidence, and 5) environmental awareness. This "Briefing Paper" will focus on summer camp as a social learning setting that promotes the development of *emotional intelligence quotient* or EI.

What exactly is emotional intelligence and how does camp instill this characteristic in young people? Psychologists have identified EI as composed of a variety of competencies and skills that can lead to positive *outcomes in the home, school, workplace and the community*.

The *intelligence quotient* or IQ score has long been used as a predictor of scholastic achievement, special needs, performance levels, and earning capacity. Although one's IQ is still held by psychologists as a benchmark for potential success, IQ must also be integrated within the capacity of one's *emotional intelligence quotient* - and unlike one's IQ levels - EI competencies can be learned and built upon through life experience.

### **Research Says**

Emotional intelligence is defined as a "type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

- Within the *Canadian Summer Camp Research Project* the highest rate of positive growth was found in the area of emotional intelligence. Sixty-nine percent of all campers in this national study experienced an increase in the development of their EI (Glover et al., 2011).
- EI development (for both campers and camp staff) and the potential for long-term benefits which could lead to a broader acknowledgment of the positive impact of organized camping on society" (Jacobs, 2004)
- EI demonstrates which human abilities will make for potential excellence in the workplace, especially in the area of leadership (Goleman, 1995).
- Noncognitive intelligence, measured by EI, may help to predict success as it reflects how one applies knowledge to an immediate situation, cope with daily situations and get along in the world (Bar-On, 1997).

### **How Camp Builds Emotional Intelligence**

How do parents generally determine success when it comes to their kids? Terms like self-esteem, fair-play, and personal best all come to mind. Some qualities can be attributed to a child's individual nature. However, much depends on nurture, which includes a combination of parenting and social environment, along with formal and informal learning. Ultimately, the goal is for our kids to become happy, successful adults. So how do we actually measure how our children are doing along the road to adulthood? Over-and-above the established measurements of personality and IQ levels, working towards increasing our children's level of emotional intelligence holds great promise.

So how can this happen through camp exactly? Camp is acknowledged as a safe setting where children can openly express themselves while also learning how to cope with others in various social situations. Socialization is a fundamental process that leads to a personal concept of self within the broader context of society. In a cabin or bunk house setting, there is a recognized mutual benefit in taking a cooperative approach to dealing with the necessities of day to day routines. Camp provides real life situations where kids can understand the immediate benefits of teamwork, sharing responsibility, compromise, and resolution within a community of their peers. Kids need this type of interaction in order to develop social skill sets that will allow them to be successful and productive members of society. The combination of independence and inter-dependence within the supportive environment at camp helped children develop their emotional intelligence.

Apart from opportunities presented by the inherent social environment of camp life, what particular strategies does camp teach that can lead to higher levels of emotional intelligence? Ideal learning environments are ones that provides optimal challenges and emotional stimulation within a context of both independence and inter-dependence. This is precisely the learning environment that a summer camp provides. At camp, children are motivated by fun, comradeship, interesting situations and dynamic activities. Additionally, camps now provides coaching and peer mentoring in the areas of anti-bullying, problem-solving, inclusion, global citizenship and environmental awareness.

Camps are dedicated to creating emotionally intelligent young people. Kids who are better able to regulate their emotional states, sooth themselves when they are upset, better at focusing attention, relate well to others, have better friendships, and quite possibly do better in school situations that require academic performance.

*Parent Perceptions* explored during the 6th year (Phase 3) of the CSCRP (Glover et al. 2013) indicated that positive changes in attitudes and behaviour continued or were maintained after camp. This finding aligns with previous Canadian summer camp research which found that learning transferability to daily life contexts can be traced back to the experiences that took place at camp (Fine, 2005).

The following parent testimonials drawn from Phase 3 illustrate the connection between camp experience and the development of emotional intelligence:

- “Upon returning home, my son was more sensitive and aware of his sister’s emotions and their interactions.”
- “Since camp, my child is very aware of those less fortunate, aware of classmates struggling with school work or social integration and...tries to go out of his way to reach out and help.”
- “My daughter used to be hypersensitive to the emotions and feelings of others. After camp she has found a healthy balance and now takes her needs and wants into consideration, and much more seriously.”
- “After camp, my daughter came out and actually told me how she felt while her sister was going through chemo.”

### **The Bottom Line**

The overarching message is that lifetime habits are generally formed during our youth, and a summer camp experience has much to offer in the successful development of well-rounded, productive, thoughtful, and compassionate adults. A summer camp experience can lead the way toward significant improvements to your child’s cognitive function, socialization, self-confidence, and emotional well-being.

## References

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