

## The Art of Camp

### Arts Camps Encourage Expression

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

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Many camps cater to a broad range of aptitudes with gender and age boundaries barely visible. In one area more than most, these factors mix in a creative whirlwind that produces some of the most ingenious, and remarkably practical displays of young minds: the arts.

Art comes in many forms. Camp classics such as tie-dye, macramé and wooden name signs are pursued alongside advanced clay pottery classes, courses in digital photography, dance, cinema, creative writing and theater.

Camp allows girls to carve sailing ships from blocks of wood and boys to throw pots at the wheel. Should this be surprising in the 21st century? Not to anyone involved in education. Nevertheless, it represents an important alternative in a broader culture that still too often adheres to stricter definitions of what constitutes normative expression by boys and by girls.

#### Attributes of the Arts

Self-expression is a cornerstone of healthy psycho-social development. When it is artificially limited, children of all ages fail to fully thrive. When it is accommodated or encouraged, it allows for experiences that shape identity and interaction with the world. Artist and educator Debby Greenwood says, "Camp is a place and a time where kids can reinvent themselves," pointing to the satisfaction and uptick in self-esteem that many campers experience when awareness of their own capabilities kicks in.

Fourteen-year-old Adam, an art, pottery, and woodworking student at camp, says, "Art helps me to express myself because I can paint or draw or carve the feelings and thoughts in my mind onto paper, canvas, or wood. Pictures in my mind that can't be said or explained can be talked about through my art. It makes me feel different and special."

And Brooke, eleven, explains, "I love to give, so I always make things for other people. It makes me feel good about myself. If I am in a not-so-great mood, expressing myself makes me feel better."

#### The Creative Side of Camping

In addition to advancing self-expression and self-esteem, there is research to suggest a broader benefit from the creative side of camping. In an article in *The Boston Globe*, professors Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland, co-authors of the book *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*, offered up their own data documenting a series of "studio habits of mind" taught to children through visual arts classes, including persistence, observing, envisioning, innovating through exploration, and reflective self-evaluation. Winner and Hetland indicate, "For students living in a rapidly changing world, the arts teach vital modes of seeing, imagining, inventing, and thinking. ... Those who have learned the lessons ... are the ones likely to come up with novel answers needed most for the future."

Such "transferability" is often overlooked from a broader educational perspective. Seventeen-year-old Danny, a dancer at school, enjoys art, photo, and cinema at camp, pointing out that the skills he learns aren't just "art" skills. "I learn to be a better listener by following the instruction," he says, "and I have become more independent by creating my own projects." Anna and Ben, thirteen, both point to woodworking as a place where they learn math skills. And Brooke says that art has taught her perseverance. "I never give up on a project, and that has taught me to use willpower in other things, like sports. If I put my heart into it, I will succeed as long as I don't give up."

## The Art Alternative

Summer camp art programs also offer important activity alternatives for campers, providing opportunities to excel in less regimented ways. Debby Greenwood shares the story of her son Dan, who, she says, arrived at camp as a non-athletic nine-year-old only to discover art and acting, a career he is now pursuing at age twenty-three. Our other artists have weighed in as well.

Brooke: "Not everyone can do — or participate in — sports and other things camps commonly have, but almost everyone can do some form of art at any age. "

Ben: "I think that art adds a lot of diversity to activities. Part of the reason I sign up for art is because I don't necessarily want to play sports all day."

## Got Art?

For years, educators have bemoaned shrinking budgets. More recently, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) fueled fears that rigid academic standards would increase shortfalls in art, music, and sciences. NCLBA does include the arts in its core academic subjects, however some say that NCLB has failed to address a growing art gap because of a lack of funding and inadequate time in the school day. Others highlight that the law does not require progress assessment in the arts as it does in other subjects such as reading and math.

In response to rising concerns that cuts to arts programs and over-reliance on testing for English and math to rate a school's performance will mean less emphasis on art, music, and other subjects, groups like Americans for the Arts are advocating for increased federal funding, better access to core academic subjects, improving data collection and research related to the arts in school, and increasing vehicles through which others can voice their support for arts education.

Greenwood cites the trend toward limited arts education, saying, "There's not enough room for the arts in even the best schools, given the competitive academic requirements. And that makes camp arts programs all the more important." Or, as Anna says, "Having arts programs at camp is great because happiness is definitely one of the most important things in life."

Having happy campers is pretty important, too.

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