



Camp Champions



Greenwoods Camp for Boys



Lake of the Woods Camp for Girls

# Summer, Unplugged

More and more, kids around the country are powering down and living it up at summer camps. By Winston Ross

HANNAH VIROSLAV isn't bashful about recounting the pain involved in relinquishing her iPhone for the three weeks she spends each summer at Camp Champions in Central Texas's Hill Country. Untethering the San Antonio 17-year-old from text messages, phone calls, and Facebook is a bit like hitting her finger with a hammer: It's excruciating.

"It's extremely difficult," Hannah says. "It's, like, your whole life."

Once she's unplugged, though, she's completely liberated, free to frolic in the outdoors for a blissful 21 days, which she

spends water skiing, horseback riding, climbing, and making crafts. Hard as it may be to put technology on hold, it's a trial Hannah looks forward to every year.

"It's kind of like a symbolic way of stepping out of the real world," she says. "It allows me to take off from home, leave my worries, thoughts about college, and stress behind. I just go escape."

It makes perfect sense, really, that kids such as Viroslov would relish the opportunity to back slowly away from their cell phones and PlayStation controllers for a few weeks each year and rediscover the

outdoors at one of the myriad options available to them nationwide via the American Camp Association (ACA). But what's striking is how much that's actually happening, in light of the full-on assault of competition these camps face from video games, hundreds of television channels, the ubiquitous Internet, and a raft of other programmed activities that make today's overscheduled child busier than a high-flying executive.

Attendance at camps across America isn't shrinking, despite the fact that childhood obesity rates are at an all-time high, not to mention that the average young person now spends nearly eight hours a day plugged into some sort of electronic media, according to a 2010 study from the Kaiser Family Foundation. In fact, for at least the past several years, attendance at camps nationwide has grown by an average of one to three percent per year, and nearly 65 percent of camps surveyed in 2006 reported an increase of four to 10 percent, which explains the ACA's otherwise cheeky goal of increasing participation numbers of school-age kids to 20 million by the year 2020. Currently, about 11 million of the country's 53 million school-age children attend camp each year. That means the ACA is looking to nearly double its numbers over the next decade.

Glance over at that child-shaped dent in the living room sofa, and that may seem a Herculean task. But it's the very proliferation of technology's tentacles that has helped parents discover camp, it turns out; they're desperate for a safe way to nudge youngsters outdoors again.

"Parents see an opportunity for kids to be kids," says Dayna Hardin, owner and director of the Lake of the Woods Camp for Girls and Greenwoods Camp for Boys in Decatur, Michigan. "It brings kids back to the world before texting, Facebooking, instant messaging, and constant communication."

Years ago, American children were booted out of their homes after breakfast every summer and advised to not come back until dinner. They'd spread out into

the neighborhood with their temporarily evicted peers and turn the world into one big playground, building forts, playing cops and robbers, and piling into sandboxes.

Times have changed, though. Whether it's their perception or reality, parents now fear that this kind of unscripted romp is simply too dangerous, which leaves two options: They can either keep little Johnny under lock and key — where he's likely to gravitate toward something that requires a power outlet — or micromanage an action-packed schedule from dawn to dusk, replete with soccer practice, playdates, and paint-your-own pottery.

"We refer to them as helicopter parents," says Harriet Lowe, director of communications at the ACA, which is based in Martinsville, Indiana. "Their children are in the house, helicoptered over, being sedentary, being obese, playing video games."

The cases of both the overscheduled and the sedentary child present problems. The latter may develop "nature-deficit disorder," a term introduced by author Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods*. The concept attributes a host of behavioral problems to spending too little time outdoors, from attention-deficit disorders to depression. Louv submits that being out-

realization for parents."

The overscheduled child can suffer repercussions, too, most of them stress-related. But what's heartening is that parents seem to be recognizing that they need to break their children loose from some of these vise grips, even if it's within the structure of a three-week program.

"For three weeks, they're disconnected from the electrical umbilical [cord]," says Steve Baskin, who, with his wife Susie, co-owns Camp Champions, the camp Hannah attends. "What replaces it is true interaction, being fully present with another human being. I say 'I'm not taking your phone away from you; I'm giving you the gift of knowing you can be spectacular without it.'"

Something certainly seems to be working. In 1996, Camp Champions' inaugural year, attendance was at 600; today, it is 1,100. Between 1999 and 2005, their annual enrollment among high school students surged from 43 to 210, where it has stayed, simply because the camp is at capacity. And in the last five years, the number of kindergartners and first graders in attendance has doubled.

The growth in camp attendance also reflects the ACA's efforts to stay relevant in a changing world. The association has accomplished this in

two primary ways: by helping parents realize that a few weeks at camp is about much more than giving a child the chance to goof off with a bow and arrow and by diversifying the types of camp experiences available to young people, so as to broaden the very definition of camp itself.

The first effort has a lot to do with marketing, Baskin says. Camp Champions, for instance, redesigned its brochure to play up the potential for growth as well as the relationships that children can expect to build with each other and with their counselors, instead of merely listing activities offered at the camp.

"We realized we're not in the activity business; we're in the youth-development business," Baskin says. "So in parents' minds, we've moved away from the part of the budget where they have cruise ships and Disney World and into the budget where they have Sylvan Learning Centers, music, and trips to the Smithsonian. They'll beat a path to your door once they understand what camp is. It's not about archery. It's about role models."

Beyond that, there are now numerous opportunities for children who might not fancy a traditional camp setting. Emagination is a program offered in several major cities that combines technological skills with outdoor pursuits, according to director Craig Whiting. In this way, the camp can interest electronically inspired children with 3-D animation workshops, lessons on creating Flash games and iPhone apps, robot building, and C++ programming. But they also require that a portion of the experience involves "getting unplugged."

"They spend four and a half hours a day in a classroom, learning, and three hours in recreation — swimming, soccer, tennis, basketball, or in outdoor camps," Whiting says. "Many of our campers would like to be on a computer 24/7. We think it's important that they not be."

There are also camps that focus on learning new languages, such as Concordia Language Villages, a camp in Minnesota's North Woods that uses immersion-style techniques to integrate language learning with an array of activities that emphasize culture as much as vocabulary.

Hannah Viroslov isn't the only one in her family who attends camp; her two siblings do too. That includes her 13-year-old sister, Olivia, who has a rare genetic disorder called Prader-Willi syndrome, which can have debilitating effects on diet, stamina, strength, and balance. She attends a camp that emphasizes less-strenuous outdoor activities.

"She has a fabulous time," says the girls' mother, Alice Viroslov. The same can be said for Hannah, who knows all too well that there are no wires in the wilderness. And that's a good thing. **AW**

**WINSTON ROSS**, a freelance journalist based in Eugene, Oregon, spends as much time staying off nature-deficit disorder as he can — when he's not sending text messages.



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side is practically a physiological need, and that when children are deprived of it, they are prone to suffering.

"We already know our children are not going to be as healthy as our generation, which is the first time we've ever seen that reverse," says Peg Smith, chief executive officer of the ACA. "That's a frightening