



Unplugging at Summer Camp:
Social skills children develop on & off line

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Introduction

Children are plugged into devices continuously throughout their entire day. The average amount of time a child is on a computer, smart phone, or electronic device is 7 ½ hours a day (Lewin & Kaiser). There is a lot of stress that children and adults have when they feel disconnected from their hand held devices or computers. A summer camp setting is unique because children have an extended stay in an environment that forces them deal with the effects of being “tech free.” Summer camp is an environment that fosters social growth. Technology like smart phones and social media sites fosters social growth as well. Summer camp and technology provide similar positive aspects to children. The difference is summer camp has a “disconnect to reconnect” philosophy, where our technology dependent society only wants children to connect more.

Children Are Plugged In

The New York Times titled an article in January 2010 “If your Kids Are Awake, They’re Probably Online.” In the article a pediatrician described the online media as being such a large part of a child’s life now “like the air they breathe, the water they drink and the food they eat” (Lewin). Computers are now a vital part of education. Where a child used to look something up in an encyclopedia in their school or community’s library, they now can instantly have the answer off their phone. Children are used to having powerful tools like search engines available at their disposal. Children feel the reward of searching like “lab rats constantly pressing levers to get tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment” (Carr 117). There are concerns that this instant satisfaction for knowledge counter acts the brains capabilities to contemplate and concentrate on thought.

Online media and the use of social technology is not just part of a child’s life. It is also how adults interact with children. A study done by internet security firm AVG in October 2010 showed that 92% of American children



under the age of 2 have an online presence (Indvik). Toddlers do not have the skill set to make a blog or create a Facebook page. A child's family members enable this online addiction. Parents have a digital umbilical cord to their children while they are at work. A child doesn't go fishing in the local park wondering if his or her parents are concerned. We live in a society where anyone can be accessed at any time. A parent can call, text, email, tweet, or facebook their child to check up on them whenever the parent is worried. Most families now text, call, email send pictures, or share links to stay close. Some parents even go to extremes of not letting their child handle any problem on their own. There are positive and negative effects to living in such a technologically dependent society.

Children Are at Summer Camp, a Tech Free Environment

Every summer several hundred-thousand children have resident or day camp experiences. A majority of these camps have a "tech free" policy. Summer Camp directors have this policy for a few reasons. The first reason is when a child has their head down while they watch a video on their iPod or play a game on their Nintendo DS, it takes away from that child making a friend with another camper. Summer camp can be a scary place to a first time camper. Campers are living with people they might have never met before. Campers are trying activities they haven't experienced before. An iPod can be a crutch for a camper to ignore what is going on right in front of them. Another reason is the independence that builds when a child has to rely on themselves. If a child is able to get an answer from their computer or their parent through their cell phone, they aren't learning how to problem solve on their own. The last reason is that the feeling of "being away" is a time-honored tradition in camping. The feeling of "being away" not only pertains to the physical location where a camp is, but also the camper's state of mind. Being removed from outside influences has a significant role in why parents send their children to camp.

Camp directors treat cell phones and computers like candy, they simply are not allowed. The difference between candy and a cell phone is that the parent reinforces the relationship of the latter. A parent can use a cell



phone to talk to their child whenever they are worried. A parent only occasionally uses candy as a bribe. For most families, candy is not a vital part of how they communicate. Anytime you remove a child from something they interact with every day, there will be an effect.

Why Children Go Online

The Kaiser Family Foundation has been conducting a 10 year study following children aged 8 to 18 pertaining to media in their lives. The foundation surveyed over 2000 children over 3 time periods. They found that children's use of technology has gone up to 7 ½ hours a day. The amount of time, which seemed impossible to increase six years ago, has gone up because now children are multitasking – watching a movie on their computer while they use Facebook on their iPhone. This study, while noting the sharp increase in technology use, showed that both grades and the amount of friendships children made stayed relatively the same. Technology can even help children keep made friendships. It was noted, “there are more than 10,000 neighborhood groups in Yahoo!’s group directories, one of many sites that offer neighbors the means to connect” (Baym 93). There are other studies that show children are still being social despite being online and connected constantly. Children are still making friends, they are simply making those friendships in a different way.

In a study on media by The Kaiser Family Foundation, children were asked about their time outdoors. Children were asked, “Thinking just about yesterday, how much time did you spend being physically active or exercising, (such as playing sports, working out, dancing, running, or another activity)?”, 89% answered that they did spend time outside yesterday and that they spent an average of 1 hour 42 minutes outdoors. This number confirms suspicions that children want to spend time outdoors. A focus of most summer camps is to reconnect children with nature. In the study “Camps and Nature” 95% of summer camps give children a chance to reconnect



with the natural environment (James). Children want to be outdoors and summer camp gives children that opportunity through intentional programming.

Why Children Go to Summer Camp

When a child arrives at summer camp, they are often in a group, also known as cabin with other campers they haven't met before. This cabin of roughly 8 campers, varying from camp to camp, is often accompanied by two young adults known as counselors. These counselors have been trained in how to facilitate building friendships and incorporate teambuilding between the campers. The counselors help children connect with each other through communication and positive encouragement. Because of this, deep and life-long friendships are often made at camp.

Summer camp isn't a one dimensional environment either. One study states, "emerging evidence suggests that camp-based groups for children and adolescents with chronic illnesses offer promise in multiple dimensions including coping, social support, education, empowerment, normalization, and coping" (MacLusky 212). Children are able to work through impacting issues such as asthma or dialysis while at a summer camp. It is this idea that often remains hidden when people outside of the summer camp industry think of a child's camping experience. "Well-run camps have the character of providing affordances where young people are exposed to and can experiment with different points of view – exploring possibilities by challenging others' ideas and having their own ideas challenged in return without the risk of simultaneously challenging their relationships with each other" (Dahl 232). It's this experimentation that provides an ideal opportunity for children to take the social skills they learned online and perfect them in a safe environment. The summer camp environment allows for experimentation with social skills through opportunities for communication between aged campers and counselors. It has been noted



that a traditional resident camp helps children, “to become independent and experiencing all the wonderful thing that happen in growing up” (Orecklin).

In a summer camp environment, compared to being online, children are able to connect with others that have similar interests to their own. The difference is that online, there is no camp counselor to provide positive encouragement. The lack of compassion and positive encouragement has lead to increasing amounts of online bullying and alienation. Using the website FormSpring as an example, this open communication has had dire effects. On the website FormSpring, visitors are able to create a profile for anyone to ask them an anonymous question. With the initial creation of the website, the user would receive all anonymous questions regardless of the content or the settings. The results led to a forum for online bullying to take place. This bullying led to extremes like teen depression and even suicide. Summer camps run an activity similar to FormSpring with campers every summer. Every camp has a different name for it. Some call them simply “get to know you games”. Others call it “The Newly Cabin Game”. The principles and philosophy to the game is the same to the website FormSpring. The purpose to get campers to share their interests, likes, and beliefs in hopes that everyone sees how similar they are. When facilitated by a trained camp counselor, the effect is incredible. Campers are easily able to identify possible new friends who they will be in a cabin with for the next several days. When done online, there is no counselor to help encourage a child to make friends with someone that has similar interests. Instead online, one can only hope.

Social Skills Children Learn Online

The internet provides a world instantly accessible and somewhere a child can easily escape. The escape might be to avoid any issues they have at home. A child who may be bullied in school can be a hero with several hundred others through an online role playing game like World of Warcraft. If a child is dealing with feelings of



exclusion and isolation while his or her parents are going through a divorce, he or she can distract themselves with social media sites like facebook or twitter. If a child isn't being listened to by their friends and family, they can make a video off of a webcam on the family's computer for millions to see. For every argument that can be made about how this type of media and technology is evil, one can find a success story.

Identity is a concept that is moldable online. One can portray themselves as who they have always wanted to be while online. For instance, a person can test themselves being completely honest about who they are in an internet forum. For some "expressing one's 'real' self online can be empowering and liberating" (Baym 116). The power of finally sharing who someone is allows for a person to feel acceptance when they not have before. A great example of this is Dan Savage's campaign "It will get better" on YouTube. Dan Savage created a channel on YouTube of hundreds of people, including celebrities, telling children that being a teenager that is gay is a rough time and you will get through it. Dan Savage "realized that with things like YouTube and social media, we can talk directly to these kids" (Parker-Pope). A child who grows up in a town with bigotry and realizes they are gay can find comfort that there are others out there. By being able to directly talk to youth, individuals are able to see that they are not alone and feel confident in their identity. Youth are able to experiment through their identity with using websites and online conversations. The author Shayla Thiele Stern noted in her book Instant Identity when interviewing teen girls "who participated in this research said that they felt IM (instant messaging) was something of a free space where they could experiment with different conversational norms than they might use in person" (29). This allows for youth to try on identities as if they were trying clothes on at a retail store. Being online also allows for children and teens to do this without the adults in their lives knowing. This can be both positive and negative depending on the content of the youth's identity.



In the book Personal Connections in the Digital Age, the author shows a cartoon displaying the negative aspects of identity online. In the cartoon a dog is using a computer, talking to another dog with the caption “on the internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Baym 33). This cartoon shows that anyone can be anyone or in this case anything. While it is great for children to explore different identities, they don’t always know who they are making connections with. In cases where people don’t know who they are making connections with, when they are self-disclosing personal information “it can backfire if one shares too much too soon or shares something the other person finds unappealing” (Baym 128). When youth are afraid of who they want to be, the result is a lack of confidence. It’s hard to maintain confidence when there is “formation of distinct online identities that might be the same or entirely different from a person’s ‘real world’” (Stern 7). The different identities might have elements for their core identity, but it allows for the person to be confused about who they really are.

Whenever a group of people are doing the same action in the same place, a community is created. This gathering on or off line might not be recognized as a community, but it essentially is. The author Nancy Baym noted “whether you are willing to consider any digitally based group a ‘community’ depends first and foremost on which of many definitions of ‘community’ you choose.” (74) Bulletin boards, chat rooms, social network sites, and blogs create a place for discussions on a common topic to occur. This shared discussion by proxy creates what a community is. It is people hearing each other’s view points. People read someone’s opinions and either take a positive or negative route. The positive route is to compliment, contributing to the discussion with links or questions. The negative route, to put it simply, is to mock or “bash.” With no face to face contact, people feel comfortable using negative language. While this creates a negative environment, nonetheless a community is still created. Depending on the community, some might be monitored by members in aspirations of asking people to follow the set rules or excluding outliers disrupting the community.



The power of online communities and social networks is that people can be brought together. With having this instant connection, family members that never talk can send write on their Facebook wall to let them know that they are thinking of them. Sites like MeetUp.com try to create community by letting people organize places for people to meet in person. Upcoming and new parents have baby blogs to share the joy of bringing a child into the world. Summer Camp Directors use Facebook to start discussions about summer programming with staff while they are away at universities around the world. The term “flash mob” describes a group of people come together using sites like twitter on their mobile device. They might be participating in a well crafted marketing ploy or in a street performance. Most recently, a flash mob in Quebec gathered to applaud a woman who recycled a bottle left in the middle of a busy mall. “She soaked up the applause for 37 seconds at a mall in Quebec, Canada, before the crowd left. A video of the prank has had 500,000 YouTube hits in five days” (Flash). This stunt brought people together to support the encouragement of recycling.

This instant communication, while it brings people together, also leaves people little to talk about when they are physically together. A common phrase with youth is “oh, I saw it on your Facebook.” Posting a status about the latest adventure of your day robs you from a story to later on tell family and friends. Pictures, videos, and comments once thought to be private can appear on CNN. Jokes, no matter how ruthless and unfunny, can be made into a national spectacle. An UCLA student made a 3 minute YouTube video titled “Asians in the Library” ranting about Asian students’ cellphone use in the library. Her video “has been viewed by millions of people, and she has become the subject of nationwide condemnation and the catalyst of a debate about racial intolerance and free speech” (Lovett). To avoid further ridicule, the videographer dropped out of UCLA. While the joke was in poor taste and inappropriate, she put something on the internet that she thought was private. Baym noted that “the ability for individuals to communicate and produce mediated content on a mass scale has led to opportunities for



fame that were not available outside of established cultural industries before, but confusion about the availability and scale of messages has also led to unplanned broadcasts of what was meant to be private” (4). There is no forgiveness with this instant communication.

The communication that happens online allows for youth to feel comfortable being direct with each other. Youth in relationships might choose to break up with someone over text or instant message instead of face to face. This can be perceived as both positive and negative. The positive is that youth have an avenue to tell someone they need space in the relationship. The negative is that by doing this indirectly, results in a lack of emotion connection they might experience. Breaking up through an electronic device doesn’t allow for someone to share and articulate their emotions. Instead, it confines a person to abbreviated sentences or short hand conversation. This lack of in-depth conversation can lead to superficial relationships with those around them.

Friendships can blossom without having face to face communication. Males and females can be friends without feeling society’s pressures of sexuality. People are able to have friendships based on the same ideals and values rather than just physical proximity. These friendships though can “remain weak and specialized, used to exchange resources around a fairly narrow set of topics of shared interest” (Baym 131). The specialized relationship though does allow for individuals to really talk in depth about one topic that one might not appreciate. Using pop music as an example, two teenagers can talk about Justin Bieber in a fan forum. While the two teenagers share how his music impacted their lives, they might find they have nothing otherwise in common. They are able to share their love for Justin Bieber, but cannot form a bond over anything else.

The internet has also created a balancing act for youth’s friendships. Author Shayla Thiele Stern distinguished “using IM at night helps Leanne and her peers manage a social world that is at once private (as it’s navigated alone in bedrooms and dens with just a computer and a keyboard) and very public (because the



conversations are so easily transmittable and many may take place at once)” (1). Conversations between two young friends online can be more open because there are no adults around, but at the same time run the risk of being replicated and displayed online. Because of the ease of copying and pasting conversations, youth might hold back from sharing sensitive and intimate information. While teens will post several Facebook “statuses” a day, none of them might be truly what is bothering the teen. Fear of spreading rumors and sharing instant messages or IM conversations will keep teens from connecting deeply. A friendship will remain fragile if the two are never able to connect on a deep level. In Stern’s research, “in most cases, the girls felt that pasted IM conversations were strongly affirmations that the gossip was actually true” (45). In another study “fifty-nine percent of girls think they have complete control over what happens with the videos, photos, and other information they post online” (Girl). While youth know they should watch what they post online, the majority believe they have over control on what happens with that information. It is this naïve perspective of youth that parents and role models must coach children on. While it is easy to feel safe when uploading an image on to Facebook because it is just the computer and the user, youth need to understand that there are 600 million people that use the service. This many people on Facebook makes posting anything hardly private.

The internet has also made the process of “friending” others stressful and aggressive. Now youth have the pressure of friending people on social network sites. With Facebook, any person can send an user a friend request. This can be a best friend, distant cousin, or boss from their first job. “It means that someone can see what you say about yourself on your profile, the pictures you post, and your friends’ posting on your ‘wall,’ the shared communication space for you and your friends” (Turkle 181). Not all youth wants to invite everyone in their life to the communication they have with their friends. The stress of being so open about every relationship only contributes to youth not feeling comfortable with themselves. They might be nervous to share their thoughts with



a person he or she only met one time through friends or maybe even their parents who now have access to conversations they would have previously not seen. “In text, messaging, and e-mail, you hide as much as you show. You can present yourself as you wish to be ‘seen’” (Turkle 207). While this concept is true, there is stress involved. Now when presenting themselves online to their close friends, the outliers in their lives can peer in as well.

In addition to the effect this has on friendships, being connected can effect a youth’s perception to take on responsibility. There is now the concept of parents and children being “digitally connected.” Also known as the digital umbilical cord, “tethered children know they have a parent on tap – a text or a call away” (Turkle 172). Parents are able to stay connected to their children as much as they want for their own comfort. This robs a child of taking on challenging experiences on their own. Children at some point will have to navigate home from school on their own. The responsibility from dealing with any emotions or issues that comes up during this adventure helps create a sense of confidence in a child’s life. The opportunity to build confidence develop a child’s character. “The cell phone buffers this moment” (Turkle 173). Parents that call or send endless text messages to their child are coming from a caring perspective. They simply want to make sure their child is safe. Parents want their children to learn responsibility, though technology like the cell phone doesn’t always allow a clear opportunity. In author Sherry Turkle’s research, she found that “several boys refer to the ‘mistake’ of having taught their parents how to text and several instant messages, which they now equate with letting genie out of the bottle” (174).

The Girl Scouts Research Institute recognized the impact that social media was having on girls’ image. The Institute conducted a study focusing on girls’ behavior online with parallels to their self image and self esteem. The results studies showed several concerns. One concern was that seventy-four percent of girls agree that “most girls my age use social networking sites to make themselves look cooler than they really are” (Girl). The concern of “making themselves look cooler” means the girls surveyed are not comfortable with themselves. Instead of



promoting who they were, the females surveyed felt pressure to portray themselves differently. These teenage girls instead of using social networking to find like minded peers, are inadvertently competing to look the coolest. While the girls' portrayals are extension of their identities, this desire to look cool creates an atmosphere for them to not feel confident in whom they are. Another similar concern raised in the research was that girls were portraying themselves negatively to look cool. "Girls downplay several positive characteristics of themselves online, most prominently their smartness, kindness, and efforts to be a good influence" (Girl). Instead of girls describing themselves as smart and kind online, they chose words like fun and social. The alarming part of this evidence is that when offline, girls did use the words smart, funny, and a good influence to describe themselves. The teenage girls are not using positive qualities to promote themselves in the pursuit of being cool. Essentially being smart or socially conscious unattractive because it is different. Statistics showed that self esteem is also lowered because of experiences with online gossiping and being bullied.

The study highlighted two positives about girls being online. The first positive aspect was that "56% of girls agree that social networks help them feel closer and more connected to their friends" (Girl). Some of the surveyed teenagers even said that social networking helped improve their relationships. Despite the false images they put online, some girls are able to connect to their peers in a way that makes them feel connected. While it might be different because of how deep they can go, girls still find they are making friends despite the negative elements social networking introduces. The second positive aspect of being online was that 52% of the girls surveyed "have gotten involved in a cause they care about through a social network" (Girl). The teenage girls surveyed were able to become more socially conscious about significant issues going on in the world because of websites like Facebook. Non profits and causes use that Facebook have been successful at getting youth to rally behind their cause. Youth



are able to understand the relief help needed with natural disasters such as earthquakes in Japan. A teenager learns essential values when they understand how important it is to be aware and helping those in need.

The girls surveyed were aware of the negative and positive traits of being online. When thinking about the involvement of parents with being online, 85% of the girls reported that they had “a conversation with their parents about social networking behavior, but half (50%) readily admit that they still aren’t as careful as they should be” (Girl). The participants in this study believe despite the consequences, portraying themselves online is worth the risks. The girls also knew that a creating profile on a social network could risk getting into a college, cost a job opportunity, or affect the relationships with the adults in their life. This study by the Girl Scouts Research Institute showed that 91% of the females surveyed that used social media in daily still valued having offline relationships. A majority of the girls sampled preferred face to face communication and 92% of them “would give up all of their social networking friends if it meant keeping their best friend” (Girl). Despite the risks taken and time used by these teenagers while social networking, they still value the friendships they have offline more.

Social Skills Children Learn at Summer Camp

The same social skills that are taught online are taught at a well run summer camp. The environment for summer camp has a huge similarity to the environment online. Children, or campers, can truly define who they want to be during a summer experience. Like being online, camp teaches children about identity, community, friendships, and responsibility. Summer camps are “are typically goal-orientated towards a common good, they strive to provide an environment that is emotionally secure, they provide opportunities for interactions between experts and novices as well as peers with peers, they provide opportunities for experimentation with leadership, and they are both creative and reflective” (Dahl 232). Because summer camp is such a closely knit and caring community, the opportunities for growth are endless. The history of summer camp has had an important effect in



the education of children. In 1922, Harvard University President Charles Eliot said, “The organized summer camp is the most important step in education that America has given the world” (150 years). People that have had a summer camp experience, alum, often refer to each other as people that “get camp.” Summer camp has such a strong culture that many alum believe it’s hard to understanding without experiencing it firsthand.

In 2005, the American Camp Association and Philip Research Associates published a study on the youth developmental outcomes of the summer camp experience. They found for a child who attended a summer camp, either overnight or day, had a significant increase in self esteem after attending summer camp. “More than 96% of parents agreed with the statement ‘the people at camp helped my child feel good about him/herself,’ and 92% of campers agreed that people at camp helped them feel good about who they were” (Philliber 6). Parents were able to notice a difference in their child’s self esteem and confidence over a short period of time. It was noted that children came home from summer camp with a positive self worth and acting more maturely for their age.

In the same study, the authors found children came home with leadership and friendship building skills as well. Leadership happens so naturally in a summer camp environment. For instance “the campers themselves are responsible for keeping the camp neat and clean by making sure their personal belongings, cubbies, and bunks are in order” (Philliber 8). Confidence is built through competence. Camp is an environment where it is the campers responsibility to take care of themselves daily by keeping their possessions together or keeping up hygiene. A well trained camp counselor is there to guide the camper, but a sense of independence and leadership is created when a child handles responsibility on their own. By being separated from their home environment, a child is pushed out of their comfort zone. When a child is out of their comfort zone, they are pushed into a learning zone. In this learning zone, campers have the guidance of a camp counselor acting as a role model with a positive example to follow. Such a positive environment creates a great atmosphere for campers to make strong friendships with their



peers. A child can enter their cabin on the first day of camp living with seven strangers and leave the last day of their stay with seven best new friends. “More than 96% of parents agreed with the statement ‘Camp helped my child make new friends,’ and 93% of campers agreed that “Camp helped me get to know kids who are different from me” (Philliber 9).

The issue of homesickness comes up frequently at overnight summer camps. It is completely normal for every child to experience homesickness while away from home. Staying in a new place without the normal comforts at home pushes a majority of children out of their comfort zone. When children are not in their comfort zone, they are vulnerable to homesickness. “A key developmental issue for children in middle childhood is to feel accepted by peers and to feel a sense of solidarity or closeness with peers and therefore perceptions of low social self-concept or perceived difficulties in peer relationships may foster or exacerbate feelings of homesickness” (Abraham 476). Children at camp that are able to overcome homesickness result in having a positive identity. A study “found that homesickness at camp was more strongly related to girls’ social self” (Abraham 494). The largest reason that the concept of social self is being improved while at camp is having a camp counselor available to facilitate positive relationships between all of the campers.

One benefit of summer camp is that it is a positive environment where so much attention is placed on the child’s social development. “Adolescence is a time when people develop and construct identity and, notably negotiate feelings of confusion as they straddle childhood and what most would consider some rather ‘adult’ concerns” (Stern 2). Adolescence has a lot of new and potentially awkward moments for child. Children try new identities, have new concerns about their relationships with their peers, and experience changes with their body all within a relatively short period of time. At home, a child will use video or online games to escape the pressures of growing up. At summer camp, when a child tries to mentally escape the pressures of adolescence, there is a camp



counselor available to guide. During adolescence, so much is happening at one time that a child needs the support of someone who has been through adolescence. The camp counselor is that positive role model. When a child is at home they might seek information about what they are experiencing online, but at summer camp where there is no technology, the camp counselor becomes their resource. The counselor, while constantly available, encourages for a child to gain the social skills by solving problems, not simply giving the solution. The difference between a counselor and an iPad is that a camp staff member has been trained to know when and how to encourage a child to solve an issue on their own.

Many children have negative experiences growing up such as bullying. Bullying can be anything obvious like verbal attacks between two children compared to more hidden like relational aggression between a group of friends. While online, no one is monitoring and moderating these type of interactions between two people or stopping them before they get out of hand. While in summer camp, a camp counselor is there to make sure everyone feels safe. A camp counselor will mediate a problem between two campers that gets out of hand. The counselor knows how to appropriately address issues that rise for children depending on their age and backgrounds. A child will also use summer camp to escape the pressures of being bullied. In a summer camp environment, children are taught to accept all. By accepting all and having shared experiences throughout the day, campers and staff transform the camp together into a well functioning community. Youth “long for a sense of personal agency and the ability to affect or be part of a positive change” (Dahl 225). A well run summer camp is a positive environment full of values that allow for youth grow and feel part of a positive change.

Summer camp, being such a positive environment, fosters opportunities for strong friendships to be made. The standard for summer camps are to be free of cellphone or internet technology. With having campers and staff truly concentrate on the people physically around them, they are able to connect with each other. In our current



society, many “face to face conversations are routinely interrupted by incoming calls and text messages” (Turkle 161). In the tech free environment of summer camp, there is no unwanted interruption while in a deep conversation. This allows for people to address each other instead of hiding behind the screen of their phone.

Being such an unique environment, a summer camp is a space where transformational learning or the “the process of developing frames of mind that support how we wish the world to be and who we wish to be” occurs (Dahl 242). Because campers and staff live together away from the concerns and distractions of the outside world, an environment is created where anything feels possible. As Dahl noted when talking about teaching peace education to children at summer camps “residential camps are, by design, youth-centered places in the grey zones posed to offer particular kinds of experience that can help young people broaden their awareness of themselves and the world, modify their attitudes and convictions about the way they and the world can be, and identify and practice the role they can play in actively shaping a better future for themselves and others – even after camp” (Dahl 243). “The awareness of themselves and the world” creates an ideal setting to teach children any new concept. In the Catskill Mountains of New York, Frost Valley YMCA runs a summer camp program called Farm Camp. Every summer at Farm Camp, children learn where their food comes from by living on a working farm. The children spend their days taking of livestock and learning how to garden. Every summer, children walk away from this program with a deeper appreciation for the earth and sustainability.

Benefits of Children Unplugging at Camp

A summer camp environment teaches campers and staff how to take a break from cell phone and computer technology. During two weeks at summer camp, a child will spend 336 hours away from media devices that could connect him to TV, the internet or cell service. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a child will spend on the average 7 ½ hours online daily consuming media. A two week period at a summer camp would allow for a



camper to have 105 hours, that was normally dedicated to consuming media, to be used elsewhere. In the 105 hours when a child can't get onto Facebook or tweet, the child now has time to focus on having positive relationships with their peers, learning responsibility, and being part of a community.

In the book *Hamlet's Blackberry*, the author William Powers discussed philosophies that dissect the concerns of being constantly "plugged into a device". The author pointed out that "if you have a screen and can pick up a signal, your mind is in the same placeless place" (Powers 64). One philosophy the author noted was Plato's documentation of a conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus. The two gentlemen, Socrates and Phaedrus, left Athens on a beautiful sunny day to get away from the city to have a conversation solely between themselves. It sounds like a simple comment but as the author mentioned "when was the last time you went off with a friend and truly left the rest of the world behind? Socrates and Phaedrus are enjoying a type of human connection—in person, dedicated, utterly private—that's quite rare today" (Williams 85). It is this type of intimate connection that happens daily with people at summer camp. Connections are in person, between only as many people wanted to let in, and not interrupted.

A guide for parents on how to manage technology in the family noted that technology isn't all negative and offers "opportunities to bring the images and words of admired people, who can inspire children toward the best of what it means to be human" (Schwarz 92). A great summer camp will do the same without using technology. Having so many young adults serving role models for children creates a huge level of admiration. The book noted that "values that are not practiced are meaningless" (Schwarz 91). At home, a parent might ask their child to be off the computer or go outside more but it raises the question that "what behavior does the parent role model?". A majority of adults are connected to media and devices just as much as their children. The term "CrackBerry" refers to an adult so strongly addicted to their BlackBerry, that it is like they were addicted to a drug. This is an important



distinction for summer camp counselors. Camp counselors live exactly like the children. At summer camp, everyone follows the policy of “disconnect to reconnect.” Staff members are role modeling the value of being unplugged.

Even universities understand the benefits of encouraging their students and faculty to unplug. Harrisburg University asked students to go a week without social media. The University took the stance that “often there are behaviors, habits, ways we use technology that we may ourselves not even be able to articulate because we’re not aware of them,” (University). It’s easy to spend a long time on “plugged in”, especially with the notifications of new email, Facebook messages, or texts interrupting the day. Harrisburg’s experiment caused controversy about on whether students should be taught how to moderate their use instead of taking a break overall. Teaching moderation would be teaching the student how to deal with the problem of being connected all the time. Teaching abstinence from being connected through technology says to students body that this type of technology should be condemned.

An argument is made that the more youth and adults are plugged in, the less they are engaged with the world immediately around them. “In an observational and interview study of four public parks with wifi in two countries (the USA and Canada), Hampton, Livio, and Sessions (in press) found that wifi users did (94) pay less attention to their surroundings. They kept their heads down and hence closed themselves off to interaction with others in the park” (Baym 95). A person who has their head down staring at a screen is not able to appreciate what’s right in front of them. If a student is playing on their iPad during class, they are not able to really process the lesson from the instructor. If a group of teenagers are texting while hanging out with each other, they might miss opportunities to engage in a deep discussion with each other.



Technology Does Not Exist Alone

David Nye, an expert on technology in society wrote “technologies are not foreign to “human nature” but inseparable from it” (2). The observations made about the social skills learned online verse the social skills learned at summer camp is not meant to stop technology. It is naïve to think that people can stop technology. Technology will evolve to what the public needs. Using cellphones as an example, the trend for a few years in the 1990s was to make them as small as possible. Now with the amount of text messaging and time people spend on email and Facebook, the mobile phone industry trend is taking the stance that small is not always better. People rather purchase a phone they can type on than one that is physically smaller. Technology exists because there is a need for it in society. Some technology though is for necessity where other technology is there for luxury.

There is a hypocrisy that happens when technology is criticized. Most camps will say they are “tech free” during the summer, but will communicate with their camper families using email, blogging, or social network sites. While summer camps advocate for a child to be unplugged for while the child is at camp, the camp will later on want their child to become a fan of the camp on Facebook Page. A camp can use social media to communicate all of the fun things to get excited for this upcoming summer. Camp directors also love this media because they can get instantly get feedback from their campers with “likes”, “re-tweets”, or comments on their “wall.” Going back to example of Harrisburg University, they wanted students to unplug for a week from social media in a school wide blackout. The hypocrisy is that “most of the students found out about the school-wide blackout through, of course, social media” (University).

One of the most positive aspects of summer camp is that campers will make lifelong friendships. These friendships will be based on shared experiences like camp activities, similar values, or appreciating the complexities of each other through conversation. Every camp director hopes for a child to make a lifelong friendship like this



over the summer. With not being distracted by notifications of instant messages over their phone, a child is able to make a friendship uninterrupted. As mentioned earlier though, this lifelong friendship will be able to exist past camp by keeping in touch. For this generation, utilizing social media is part of keeping in touch and developing that friendship. Baym noted that “most relationships are characterized by ‘media multiplexity,’ meaning that they are conducted through more than one medium, and that closer relationships use more media” (132). Summer camp condemns technology while the child stays at the camp, but essentially encourages it in the outside months.

Nye wrote “each technology is an extension of human lives: someone makes it, someone owns it, some oppose it, many use it, and all interpret it” (47). Children and adults will continue to use technology. It is important like most things in life not to overindulge when using a iPhone or Facebook. Children should not be learning their social skills solely from social networks or electronic devices. Children need to go to a place like a summer camp to balance out there life. Every organization, person, and inanimate object now has a web presence. While it’s great that everything is so easily connected and accessible, it’s important to balance this out with time spent offline. Summer camp provides a great opportunity to be a technological vacation while allowing for campers to perfect their social and life skills.



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