

Contact:  
Kay Paumier  
Communications Plus  
510-656-8512  
[kay@communicationsplus.net](mailto:kay@communicationsplus.net)  
kay@comcast.net

## **“Let’s Get Physical...”**

One of the greatest joys of summer camp is the chance to “get physical.” This is particularly important today, as children have fewer opportunities for physical activities, and are spending more and more time in sedentary activities.

In this environment, summer camp can offer an oasis of supervised, wholesome activities, for both teams and individuals. Besides being fun, physical activities can tremendously benefit a child – physically, emotionally and academically. Camp provides a rare opportunity for kids to learn the skills and attitudes necessary for them to lead healthy, active, productive lives.

### **The Situation**

Unfortunately, for children the amount of physical activity has been seriously declining in recent years. Kids increasingly spend their time playing video games, sitting in front of the TV or playing on the computer. Many school and community recreational activities have been curtailed because of budget cuts.

One result is a dramatic rise in childhood obesity. According to the American Obesity Association, approximately 25 percent of children and adolescents are considered overweight, a figure that has doubled in the past 30 years.

Overweight children face serious health and social consequences, both as youngsters and as adults. Several diseases, most notably cardiovascular disease and type two diabetes, are increasing in epidemic proportions, partially due to sedentary lifestyles. Also, obese children are at significant risk of developing psychological disorders, including depression and poor self-esteem.

### **The Role of Summer Camps**

“Summer camp can help in a variety of ways, exposing children to different types of physical activities, increasing their skills and improving their confidence,” said Andrew Townsend, president of the Northern California section of the American

Camping Association (ACA). “Camps vary widely in the amount of physical activity provided, so the important thing is to match the camp to your child’s interests and abilities. That way, you can assure your kid gets the significant physical, emotional and academic benefits of physical activity.”

Those benefits include improved health, a larger skill set, better self-esteem and enhanced academic performance.

**Increased Activity** – The American Council on Exercise recommends everyone get at least 60 minutes of moderately intense physical activity a day. And the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents limit their children’s TV viewing to no more than two hours of quality programming a day. However, for busy parents, curtailing television can be difficult, especially if they are working outside the home.

Camp, by definition, takes kids away from TV and video games, and almost always includes at least an hour of physical activity. Camp also shows kids they can have a good time without being entertained, which is particularly important today when so many kids have lost the art of playing.

**Range of Activities** – Camps have a range of activities allowing parents and children to select a camp program that meets their individual interests.

Many of the activities involve teams, allowing kids to develop teamwork, respect, responsibility and communication. This helps develop camaraderie and increase their sense of community.

Other activities are individual sports, such as hiking, horseback riding and swimming. Children can take this new expertise with them and participate in the activity on their own, even unto adulthood. In effect, then, camp can help teach kids health skills for a lifetime.

Often, kids can choose at least some of their camp activities, giving them the opportunity to enhance existing skills and to sample activities they wouldn’t ordinarily have a chance to try. Most kids are more willing to try new things in the socially protected camp environment, where they can sample an activity or sport without a major commitment. Because the children are often with a different group than their usual friends, less “stigma” is involved as they learn new skills.

**Coaching** – Some children do not participate in sports simply because they do not know how to play or how to play well. At ACA-accredited camps, trained counselors provide the instruction. Youngsters often get more individualized help at camp because the ratio of coaches to kids is more favorable than in many PE classes. In day camps, for example, ACA specifies a minimum of one counselor for every six to 12 campers, depending on their ages. For resident camps, the recommended ratio is one counselor for every five to 12 campers, with higher ratios for campers with special physical, medical or behavioral needs.

**Competitive and Non-competitive Environments** – According to the California Research Bureau’s Children’s Healthy Lifestyle project, some children do not participate in sports because they are so highly competitive. ACA-accredited summer camps can provide both competitive and non-competitive activities. Children can be given the opportunity to do physical activities individually, in small groups and in large groups.

Again, the important thing is that the competitive or non-competitive nature of the activity be appropriate for the individual child. The ACA recommends parents ask the camp director about the types of activities to help them choose the right camp for their children.

**Self-esteem** – Studies show that one of the major benefits of summer camp is improved self-esteem, which comes partially from trying new things and learning new skills. Whenever kids increase competency, they feel better about themselves and this carries over to other aspects of their lives.

Additionally, the American Council on Exercise states that exercise is one of the most effective methods of relieving stress, burning off extra energy, relieving mild depression, and helping kids (and adults) maintain their “cool.”

**Academic Achievement** – Physically fit children perform better academically. A California Department of Education (CDE) study, released last December, shows a distinct relationship between academic achievement and the physical fitness of California’s public school students.

The study found that higher achievement was associated with higher levels of fitness at each of the three grade levels measured. The relationship between academic achievement and fitness was greater in mathematics than in reading. Students who met

minimum fitness levels in three or more physical fitness areas showed the greatest gains in academic achievement at all three grade levels. Girls demonstrated greater achievement than boys, particularly at the higher fitness levels.

### **Guidelines on Choosing a Camp**

“Any physical education program should provide children with the knowledge, skills and confidence to participate in health-enhancing physical activity throughout their lives,” Townsend said. “No one program is better than another. The important thing is to match the program to your child.”

To help you make that choice, the American Camping Association has a directory of ACA-accredited camps in Northern California. ACA accreditation verifies that a camp complies with up to 300 individual health, safety and program-quality standards for living areas, food service, emergency preparedness, program practices, health care, personnel, transportation and administrative procedures. While many good camps are not accredited, ACA accreditation is tangible proof of a camp’s ability to meet or exceed the standards in the industry.

To get a free copy of the directory, call (800) 362-2236. The information is also available online at <http://www.acanorcal.org>.