



Photo: Northway-Wesdigo

Kids Unplugged

Camp is all about face-to-face relationships, which is why a few days, a week or even a whole summer without technology is a good thing for most children and teenagers

By Lynn Glazier

Ask any 13-year-old teenager what role technology plays in his or her life and the answer you'll likely get is "everything."

Most teens today are brilliant multitaskers: they can text their friends, chat on MSN, do a quiz on Facebook, listen to a favourite tune on their MP3 player, all while writing an essay for school due the next day. With a simple keyboard command and a click of the mouse, they can minimize their online activities to a small icon in the split second before you come into the room asking about their progress on homework.

Kids today exist "in the moment" and are accustomed to conversing with each other through devices (i.e., technology). The idea of giving up this virtual social world for a week or a whole summer seems unthinkable and impossible.

Yet more and more summer camps are asking campers and counsellors alike to do just that, with good reason. Camp is all about face-to-face relationships — bonding with new friends, mastering outdoor skills and having an appreciation for the simple, uncomplicated life camp offers. Experiences that take time and require critical thinking.

Most of today's day and residential camps ban or limit personal technology, particularly cell phones, personal game players, DVD players and laptops, along with other intrusions from city life (not to mention fire hazards), like flat irons and hair dryers. Parents are clearly warned, prior to camp, that this paraphernalia at camp will not be tolerated. Many camps even perform routine cabin and tent searches and any verboten gizmo found tucked away in a pillowcase or at the bottom of a duffel bag is confiscated.

While getting serious about "unplugging" at camp is a step in the right

direction, it is arguably even more important for camp directors to “plug in” to the significant role and influence these technologies and the media messages they communicate have on young people.

Teens today are navigating the most sexually explicit and violent popular culture in history. They are growing up on a steady diet of provocative reality television, online pornography, a clothing industry pushing everything skimpy, and icons like Paris Hilton. Some girls plaster the Internet with sexy photos of themselves, while some boys feel entitled to type “show me your boobs” or “slut” or “you’re so gay” in online chats with friends.

Everyone is being bombarded with messages to be sexually brazen or else be labeled a loser. The pressure is enormous. Recent Canadian research out of York University in Toronto, Ont., cites that 85 per cent of students say they have been sexually harassed by the time they graduate from high school — anything from unwanted comments and gestures to touching.

Most revealing is that teens do not automatically define these behaviours as harassment or bullying or assault — dissing, grabbing and sexual gossip are just what happens when you are a teenager, they say. You learn to live with it or else you embrace it as the ticket to popularity.

Some campers and teenaged staff are not abandoning these attitudes in favour of listening to loons on the lake and building campfires. Take the ubiquitous MP3 player. Many camps allow them at rest hour or bedtime. But what kind of music do kids listen to for hours every day all year long? This hit home with me when my daughter — who was nine years old at the time — reported that lunchtime at her day camp involved dancing to popular rap songs. The teen staff thought the beats were cool and didn’t blink twice at the “bitches and ho’s” lyrics. Sorry, but this ain’t the Macarena! When your pre-teen is old enough to decipher the slang and realize what these songs are about, mainly graphic sex and misogyny, will the message just seem benign and acceptable because, “Well gee, they learned it at summer camp?”

The hyper-sexualized and often degrading popular culture kids consume today is even infiltrating the staples of camp life. Cheers and songs are increasingly peppered with words like, “We’re so hot, We’re so sexy” rather than “We’re the best, we have the zest,” chants I remember from my own camp days. At overnight camp last summer, an astute cabin mate of my daughter actually asked why cheers couldn’t be about activities or camp spirit. The unit head — a young woman in her early twenties — just shrugged and said she didn’t see the problem.

Where are the mature adults running summer camps on this issue? It’s a question every parent should ask before shelling out hundreds or even thousands of dollars to give their child an experience in what’s being sold to them as an oasis from the trappings of the urban jungle. The unhealthy influence and messaging of teen pop culture need to be discarded, along with the technology that facilitates it. **CC**

Lynn Glazier is an award-winning journalist and filmmaker. Her latest documentary, “It’s a Teen’s World: wired for sex, lies and power trips,” gives teens a voice to explore the issue of sexual pressures in their social world. Visit www.itsateensworld.com for information about the film, educational resources and the newly released enhanced DVD. Lynn is also in-demand as a speaker on the topic of sexual harassment among teens. A long-time camper and staff member, she delivered a keynote address at this year’s Ontario Camps Association’s Annual Conference.

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