



Structured Summers?

Kids' camps have appeal, but what about lazy-days downtime?

By Kelli Wheeler

To summer camp, or not to summer camp? That is the question.

Initially, I was not a big believer in summer camp. To me, summer meant unstructured and uncommitted. Whoever coined the term “lazy days of summer” was my kind of people.

When I was a kid, part of the thrill of summer was its possibilities. A 90-day string of endless summer days and extended-play summer nights stretched beyond the capacity of my juvenile foresight.

At our house, summer camp had a whole different meaning.

Nature camp was exploring the nearby creek, capturing tadpoles until the water dried up, then catching the frogs that lingered in the shady slurrries of mud.

Sports camp was hopping on your bike after breakfast, riding up and down the street until enough kids had trickled out of their houses to form a game of Mother May I, Red

Light/Green Light, Three Flies Up or kickball.

Day camp meant Mom would drop us off at the community pool with 50 cents to get in and, on a bonus day, 50 cents to get a chocolate malt, too.

Water Week was moving the Slip N Slide to a different yard every day so someone's dad wouldn't get mad at us for creating a 14-foot rectangular rotting marsh in the lawn.

Arts and Crafts Week was when it was too hot to play outside and in order to stay in the air-conditioned house, my best friend's mom said we had to be doing something constructive.

Science Week was bringing those tadpoles home we caught, trying to figure out how to keep them alive long enough to witness their metamorphosis, eventually dissecting them when they never made it.

But the best camp of all was when Dad would announce it was time to load up the trailer because we were heading to his favorite mountain lake to do some real camping.

So when I recalled my fond summer memories to my mom, telling her I didn't get why everyone was in such a rush to sign the kids up for summer camp, she finally popped on that overhead light of reality that had kept my kid perspective in the dark.

Summer camp was not a question or an option for our family. “We would have loved to send you kids to camp, but we didn't have the money. I always felt bad you guys had to miss out on those traditional experiences.”

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I quickly assured her I didn't know what I was missing and it turned out all good. But later, I was surprised to find what I thought were crystal-clear recollections come into even sharper focus under this new light.

Those weeks I had no one to play with because my friends were at summer camp. How those endless summer days of possibilities caught me moping and bored with another day of nowhere to go and nothing to do. How excited I became with anticipation of a planned activity that would break up the monotony. Those times that were like sleep-over camp, such as staying at my cousin's house for two weeks and all the fun things we did, that would come to define my whole summer.

Suddenly, Camp Have-A-Lot of Fun sounded like something my kids shouldn't be missing. I became a crazy woman, collecting information on any camp any mom had ever sent her kids to. I was practically running around yelling, “My kids will have camp! Sport camp! Dance camp! Astronaut camp! Fat camp! Skinny camp!”

I may have missed the memo on signing your kids up in utero for preschool and been 83rd in line for kindergarten registration when I showed up 45 minutes early, but all those Type A moms had nothing on me for summer camp signups. The line started behind me.

I was so intent on giving my kids what I didn't have, I nearly forgot what I did have. The chance to be a kid at my own pace, on my own terms, in my own carefree summer time.

I eventually found the answer to my summer camp question. I decided my kids could choose up to three weeks of camps that enhanced their developing interests, nestling it in with family fun adventures and plenty of lazy days of summer.

There is no question about it, though—summers past or present, camp or no camp, one thing is the same: The possibilities of summer are free, and you don't have to be first in line to sign up for them.

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