

Summertime Belongs to Children & The Joy of Choosing

Don Webb, May 2008

As an Outdoor Educator, I often wonder where my intrinsic beliefs originated, regarding what I know is best for children being outside. Part of it comes from Donnie and his dog, Wiggles. In the 1950's Wiggles and I would be gone all day until somehow we knew it was supper time, or we would hear Dad whistling the Whippoorwill bird song. On weekend days, and those endless summertime days, we explored the woods, farm fields, and Bush River, all in Magnolia, Maryland. Childhood friends would share these adventures.

Some summers were spent with my cousin in up state New York. We would get up early, have breakfast, get our tennis rackets, hop on our bikes, ride across the bridge to the tennis courts, playing tennis for hours. We would stop to play checkers or marbles on the playground, swing, and sit on wax paper on the curving slide so we would go faster, or head over to the library - getting a Hardy Boys book, or a Zane Grey novel, lying on the grass and reading. We would ride back across the bridge (pea shooters in hand), meet friends, and go exploring on the "island," often going giggling for frogs, or just revisiting special pine wood forest places. After supper, my aunt and uncle allowed us to head out on our bikes again, often eventually riding over to the drive-in movies, sneaking in, and sitting on the front row. Yes, the times were different back then, yet what an impact they have had!

What I hold dear from those summertime days was that I felt empowered to choose what I wanted to do outside. Be it with Wiggles, my neighbors, or with my cousin, I valued the trust and respect given to me by my parents and relatives. Perhaps these childhood adventures, explorations, and my childhood sense of wonder, brought forth the birth of Nature Camps, as well as my teaching approach of always starting where the learner is coming from.

As the years have gone by, I have gleaned much from graduate school work, teaching, volunteer work with the Association of Experiential Education, listening to and learning with my own children, networking with professional colleagues and friends, and most recent graduate school work in Marriage and Family Therapy. These experiences have brought forth deepened understandings of meaningful educational and psychological theories at Nature Camps: experiential learning, adventure therapy, and mixed age learning. I continue the exciting challenge of putting practice and theory together in working with children, families, and NC's outstanding outdoor education staff.

At Nature Camps, after the first day and a half of orientation -- of an all day hike, making a fire and cooking inks to draw and write with, making nature journals, playing initiatives, having a swim test, and cooling off at the pool -- all other activities are by choice.

In a highly structured setting, children delight in deciding what they (and their friends) want to do, choosing half day or all day adventures, crafts, and mellow times - all experienced in a safe and secure environment.

This is what makes Nature Camps unique and meaningful, allowing children to choose by placing value upon the inestimable worth of each child.