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Wrap Up the Perfect Gift—Camp!

by Peg L. Smith

What if you could wrap self-confidence, a sense of independence, and every good thing you would wish for your child that will add value to their successful transition to adulthood—and tie it with a bow as your gift this holiday season? Although that's a fanciful idea, you can give your child those intangible treasures just as you would give him or her the most "in" gift of the year. This year, for the holidays, you can give the gift of camp.

Camp is a gift that's truly interactive. In a safe and nurturing environment, camp enhances campers' social skills through group activities and the chance to make new friends.

Because camp is for everyone, children and teens have the opportunity to meet and interact with peers from outside their school environment, allowing them to expand their horizons and be themselves in a learning environment - camp. Through activities that promote sharing and teamwork, camp provides experiences for children and teens to practice leadership, learn compassion and commitment to larger goals.

The best toys and games help children learn, and camp is no exception. With organized and intentional programs, camp can supplement formal education with a balance of experiential learning programs that are physical, emotional, and social. There are camps and camp programs that specialize in a myriad of activities. Computers, performing arts, marine biology, filmmaking, cooking, medical training – all of these interests are programs that are currently offered by camps. Whatever your child or teen's interest, there's probably a camp somewhere that can address his or her special career interest or hobby.

There aren't many presents that can increase a child's self-esteem, but camp can and does offer that opportunity. At camp, children experience successes that promote self-confidence and future academic growth. Camp creates experiential learning through exploration and discovery. Independent research published by the American Camp Association® (ACA) shows that parents and camp staff, as well as chil-

dren, report significant growth in several areas, including leadership, independence, social comfort, and values and decisions.

No matter what the weather at the holidays, a gift of summer camp gives your child or teen the opportunity to enjoy, appreciate, and care for the natural world. Because of the special environment at camp, children have fun learning about themselves and the natural world. It also gives them a chance to be "unplugged." More and more experts are demonstrating the value of time spent in nature for children – and camp is a perfect place to do that.

Better than a new piece of sports gear, camp provides the opportunity for children to stay physically active. With concerns about children's health and childhood obesity, there has never been a better time for a camp experience for kids. Camp programs have traditionally offered – and continue to offer – physical activities and sports that enhance health and teach self-confidence. From kayaking to swimming to challenge

and ropes courses, camp is the ultimate outdoor sports experience.

Unlike clothing that can go out of style and simply may not be the right size, camp is a gift that suits virtually every child. Does your child enjoy drawing and painting? Would your younger child benefit from a day camp experience? Are you looking for a special cultural focus or affiliation for your child? Last year, more than 10 million children and teens benefited from a camp experience, and there are many options to choose from. ACA accredits over 2,400 day and resident camps in the United States, and all can be found in a searchable database at www.CampParents.org.

ACA accreditation assures families that the camp they are considering for their child has had an independent safety audit of up to 300 standards for health, safety, and programming. You and your child can search for just the right camp based on choices such as budget, location, gender, age, and special programs. At www.CampParents.org, you'll also find a conven-

ient "Give the Gift of Camp" gift certificate that you can wrap and present to your favorite child.

As you consider all the possible gifts you can give your children or grandchildren this holiday season, maybe one of the most precious ones is a gift that makes memories. Camp is an experience for a lifetime that your child will cherish. Doesn't camp sound like one of the best gifts you could possibly give?

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With nearly three decades of experience working with children, youth, and families, Peg L. Smith is the chief executive officer of the American Camp Association® (ACA). With up to 300 health, safety, and programming standards, ACA is the only national association that accredits camps and promotes a safe and fun camp experience with developmental benefits backed by independent research. To learn more about ACA, please visit www.CampParents.org or www.ACAcamps.org.

Change a Life: Send a Child to Camp
Children are our future, and the skills learned and relationships fostered at camp are often life-changing stepping stones on the road to adulthood. They come to camp from all walks of life, eager to learn, yearning to make new friends, ready to take on new challenges, and discover gifts they didn't know they had. Benjamin Franklin once said, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." The camp experience involves children in the lessons of life. Camp celebrates diversity and promotes tolerance. It holds a mirror up so children can see, no matter what their color, gender, or socioeconomic circumstances, that who they are is beautiful inside and out.

Camp gets kids back to nature. Unplugged from the computer, the video games, the cell phone, they gain an appreciation for the natural environment and discover the wisdom and fun it has to offer.

Camp teaches children how to cope with life's obstacles, become a leader, think outside of the box, and succeed at being themselves. The camp experience changes children. Research by the American Camp Association (ACA) showed that ninety-two percent of campers felt better about themselves after the camp experience. There is a camp for every child, and every child deserves the benefits of camp. Throw the doors to a brighter future wide open and help shape the leaders of tomorrow. Send a child to camp today.

Visit www.ACAcamps.org to Change a Life and help send a child in need to camp. Eighty-two cents of each dollar donated goes directly toward a child's camp tuition.

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