

Here's why you should send your kid to an arts camp this summer

All children — not just your budding Matisse, Ellington, or Streep — can have fun and unleash their creativity.



LINZIE HUNTER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By Meaghan O'Neill | FEBRUARY 24, 2017

Arts and culture make up a \$704 billion industry in the United States — that’s more than 4 percent of our nation’s gross domestic product — and business leaders say that creativity is among the top skills they look for when hiring, as well as one of the most important traits for success. Research also shows that a solid arts education in school enhances student outcomes in multiple ways: Motivation and attendance improve, standardized test scores go up, dropout rates go down. Musical instruction can boost brain development in young children, with effects lasting into adulthood. Even many STEM educational programs — which are focused on science, technology, engineering, and math — have turned into STEAM programs. The A, for “art and design,” helps students understand the subjects’ realworld and interdisciplinary applications.

Yet we’ve largely defunded the arts in schools nationwide for the past several years, and it’s unclear what will happen to the programs under our new federal administration. Even for schools with thriving arts programs, there’s little question, though, which classes would be first on the chopping block in a budget crisis. But one other thing is also certain: Summer is a great time to enhance arts education.

Enter summer camp — and from the wilds of Maine to the suburbs of Boston, New England is home to some of the best arts-focused camps out there. Some benefits are obvious, like the classic skills kids can acquire or improve — line drawing, photography, or ballet technique, say. Then there are the fascinating and relatively new camp trends like culinary arts, circus school, and even what camps are calling “action” arts (skateboarding and mountain biking, for example).

Arts camps can deliver more subtle benefits, too. “Camps encourage the kind of collaboration, innovation, and problem solving that you don’t get in school anymore,” says Bette Bussel, executive director of the American Camp Association’s New England chapter (781-541-6080, acanewengland.org), a professional organization that accredits camps throughout the region. “That goes for arts camps especially, which allow kids to make mistakes and build resilience.”

Regardless of skill level or the length of a program, arts camps are uniquely poised to deliver these lessons in largely noncompetitive environments that focus on process over product.

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For a lot of kids, summer away at camp (free from regular classes and homework) may be their first taste of this kind of supervised freedom.

At Buck's Rock Performing and Creative Arts Camp (860-354-5030, bucksrockcamp.com) in New Milford, Connecticut, young people can test the waters of performing and creative arts — including lighting design, culinary, glass blowing, and radio broadcasting — taught in 41 studios. When a gong rings at 9 a.m. each day, campers begin visiting studios at will — no sign-ups needed, no time commitment required.

“The arts teach everything — creativity, confidence, problem solving,” says Noah Salzman, executive director of Buck's Rock, which offers two- to eight-week sleepaway programs for kids 9 to 16. “It's our job as adults to define what's allowed, but it's the kids' job to figure out what they like and [learn] about themselves.” Salzman, who attended Buck's Rock himself as a child, credits the camp with inspiring him to study glass blowing at the Rhode Island School of Design before going into a career in education.



Glass blowing is one of the skills taught at Buck's Rock in Connecticut.

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At the end of the day (or season), all good summer camps should be about having fun and building new friendships. Arts-specific camps are about acquiring new skills, but, more important, they can foster personal growth. "It's not about finding out who you are as an artist," says Salzman of Buck's Rock, "but who you are as a human being."

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