

St. Charles Park District Summer Camps Benefit Parents - and Children, Too!

The Henrikson girls are happy campers. So are the Ortiz boys and the Yetter children. With vibrant, busy days spent swimming, playing tag, making crafts, and even cooking up a snack or two, who wouldn't be happy?

And even though they're not the ones contentedly frolicking in the fresh air and sunshine, summer day camps have a way of making parents happy, too. First of all, there's the obvious correlation: when the kids are having a good time, mom and dad can enjoy their own peace of mind.

But there are even more important benefits to the summer day camp programs offered by the St. Charles Park District. From convenient drop-off and pick-up hours to partial- and full-day schedules, park district summer camps strive to make parents' lives easier while their kids go about the hard work of having fun.

For working parents like Jack and Julie Yetter, the availability of before- and after-camp care is a big plus. Camp programs can start anywhere from 8:45 to 9:30 in the morning, long after the time most folks have to be at work -- never mind the commute — and can end as late as 3:30 in the afternoon. Thanks to “Before and Beyond Camp” sessions, however, parents can bring their children in as early as 7:15 and come for them up until 6 PM, a flexible schedule that parents find very manageable. Previously available only to kids entering grades 1 through 6, these extended camp care programs will be offered for the first time during summer 2010 for five-year-old children enrolled in Kindergarten Kamp.



“Before and after camp care is a must for us,” says Yetter, who also appreciates its cost-effectiveness. “The programs are reasonably priced compared to other full-time programs,” she says.

While affordability is a key factor when considering summer camps, many people question the necessity of paying for what they think of as, essentially, play time. It's a popular misconception that summer camp is just a place where kids go to run around outside all day. Nothing could be further from the truth, according to Krista Mulready, supervisor of early childhood/preschool and camp programs for the park district.



“It’s a day of moving, moving, moving,” says Mulready, “and moving with a purpose.” Camp activities are, first and foremost, designed to be entertaining, but it’s entertainment that educates, as well. Art projects can strengthen fine motor skills, while games designed around an “Olympic Week” theme also teach them about the culture of other countries. Activities are planned to keep kids busy while helping them learn how to transition from one task to another, a skill that is important during the regular school year.

A typical summer camp day might see kids playing mini-golf, followed by work on a craft project, and then a walking field trip into downtown St. Charles to visit a local business. Two afternoons a week, they’ll go to the pool. When things get too hot, they’ll come inside Pottawatomie Community Center and learn how to make fruit “caterpillars” or do a

science project as part of the popular “Mad Lab” curriculum that explores art, science, and cooking projects.

“It’s a very, very jam-packed day,” says Mulready.

Which is just what appeals to Carrie Ortiz. The mother of three sons, ranging in ages from 4 to 9, Ortiz describes her boys as “high energy,” and enrolls them in two to three sessions per summer. Her sons have progressed from preschool camps such as Pottawatomie Pals and Ferson Creek Friends to Kindergarten Kamp, while the two oldest boys are into Adventure Day Camp and Junior Day Camp, “by far, our favorite,” says Ortiz.

Maybe it’s the old-fashioned fun stuff her kids get to do — like playing “Red Rover” or “Red Light, Green Light” — or maybe it’s hiking through Delnor Woods or learning how to make homemade ice cream that makes the Ortiz boys get up each morning with smiles on their faces and ask “is today a camp day?” In fact, after watching her children so eagerly look forward to their camp sessions, Ortiz raved about the park district to family members, who sent her nephew out from the city to attend camp with his cousins this past summer.

“He cried when it was time to go back home, and plans on coming again this year,” says Ortiz.

Such an experience was made possible in large part by the counselors who conduct the camp programs. Many parents find they’re already acquainted with these counselors, having met them first as instructors in the park district’s preschool program. For Ortiz, realizing her children would not be spending the summer with strangers was a defining element in making the decision to enroll them in summer camp.



“I felt very comfortable when I was sending my two oldest to camp for the first time because it was being led by the wonderful staff we already knew and trusted,” she says. “We’re lucky because we know the counselors so well. The kids look forward to seeing them again, and miss them when camp is over.”

It's a sentiment echoed by Melanie Henrikson, who speaks from six years' experience sending her son and daughters to various camp programs. "The counselors are the best thing about camp," she says. Being repeat campers, the Henrikson children have established fond relationships with their counselors, many of whom also return year after year. "The curriculum is amazing, but the counselors have brought me back," she says.

In fact, Henrikson has enjoyed watching the counselors grow right along with her children, aware of every passing year as these young adults move on through high school and into college. "You get to know these counselors, and when you're at their age, you know it's a conscious decision they've made to want to be with kids," observes Henrikson, noting that many counselors build upon their summer training as preparation for careers in education or recreation.



Getting to know the counselors so well is, however, part of the experience that parents like Henrikson find bittersweet. "I cry at the end of camp because I know I might not see them again," she says.

Making such long-lasting and deep-seated friendships provides another "teachable moment" for campers. Not only do children get to bond with their counselors, they get to strengthen the relationships they have with other children, many of whom they already know from school or after-school activities. "It's a great way to get to know people from all over town," says Ortiz. "It's another connection to the community. We love it!"

Building a sense of community, learning how to be respectful of others, developing their endurance for several hours of focused activity are all essential skills that children will need during school year (and throughout life, for that matter.) But as the Henrikson, Ortiz, and Yetter families will tell you, having their children accomplish all this through a secure, stimulating, and active camp environment is a bonus.

"It's awesome, under the canopy of trees in the morning at Pottawatomie Park," says Ortiz. "Where else would you want to spend your days?"

For more information about the St. Charles Park District summer camp curriculum, contact the Pottawatomie Community Center Recreation Department at 630-513-6200, or visit the web site at www.stcparks.org.