



From a 2e Perspective

Summer Camp Success

By Dan Peters, Ph.D.

Thirty-two gifted, talented, and creative kids from ages 8 to 14 spent a week at Camp Summit in northern California this past July. Of the 32 campers, 15 were identified by their parents as having one or more exceptionalities, including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), Asperger Syndrome, sensory processing disorder (SPD), depression, anxiety, dyslexia, and dysgraphia. Several campers were identified as having “social issues,” and others were labeled as “highly intense and sensitive.”

Camp Summit immediately came to life during camper check-in. One 2e child had requested permission to bring his LARP (live action role play) equipment to the camp and, within minutes, an elaborate battle was underway on the lawn as campers donned padded “weapons” and planned strategic attacks with their allies. In another area, several new campers were engaged in board games such as chess, while others shared their magic cards with one another.

Campers had an array of organized activities to choose from that included creative and expressive arts, Rube Goldberg engineering designs, Dungeons and Dragons, philosophy, masks and myth, improvisation, capture the flag, and various nature activities. But it was the free-time periods that were magical. Campers sought out each other based on their interest areas, levels of intensity, and friendships. There was an unexpected and somewhat strange sense of calm during these times as the campers appeared to be “flowing” within themselves and with one another. We kept waiting for the difficulties to arise, especially from the children with “social problems”; but with very few exceptions, they did not occur. In fact, several of the kids who were seen as having social difficulty actually emerged as leaders among their peers.

All in all, Camp Summit was a success, based on our observations of the campers and the campers’ reports. Out of 32 campers, 30 said they want to come back next year. The other two campers said “maybe.” Why was Camp Summit so successful? Why did 2e campers have such a positive experience?

We feel that Camp Summit embodied the basic, yet critical, guiding principles for nurturing the growth of gifted

youth in general, and 2e youth in particular. First, the environment was designed to be “flexible within a structure.” While it was important for campers to have a sense of what to expect ahead of time, we were flexible based on their energy level, preferences, and individual needs. Second, the camp was staffed by adults who counsel, teach, and work with gifted kids in a variety of settings, as well as by teen counselors who are gifted themselves. Thus, the campers’ intensities, sensitivities, and (at times) “quirks” were understood in a way that allowed for helpful intervention.

Next, although the campers came with different levels of intensities, different sensitivities, and different labels, they were among true peers. They connected with one another based on their passions and interests, and they found friends and playmates with whom they could share their ideas. Thus, they were “mirrored” and validated for who they are. Finally, and equally essential, we followed the mantra, “Lead with their strengths.” Because campers had choices, they engaged in their strength areas; and while campers’ strengths were emphasized continually, their weaknesses were dealt with on an as-needed basis. Although some activities were required, we were flexible about participation when exceptionalities might negatively interfere.

So now you might be thinking, if it works at camp, why not at school? That’s a very good question and one that those of us who work with 2e kids ponder daily. Camp Summit is not school, but the principles we applied there are critical for 2e kids. Why can’t school be more like camp?

Dan Peters is a clinical psychologist. He is the co-founder of both Camp Summit (www.campsummitforthegifted.com) and the Summit Center (<http://summitcenter.us>), which specializes in the assessment and treatment of children, adolescents, and families, with special emphasis on gifted, talented, and creative individuals. ☐

