

Handwritten, But Dropped In the Inbox

CAMP, From D1

While technology can alleviate homesickness for antsy campers - and lessen anxiety for parents - some camp enthusiasts warn that such constant contact defeats the independence, boosting spirit of summer camps and keeps kids too plugged in when they should be frolicking outdoors.

Several Internet-based companies provide these features for camps, which often don't have the resources or the know-how to share video or photos online. New York-based Bunk1.com hosts photo galleries, organizes parent e-mails and sends handwritten letters to parents' inboxes.

Camp Staunton Meadows, a small co-ed summer camp in Clover, Va., posts more than a hundred photos on its Web site for parents to view and print, distributes about 50 parent e-mails to campers, and sends about 30 handwritten replies to parent inboxes with the help of Bunk1.com each day.

"Parents have really enjoyed being able hear back from campers on the same day," said Andy Adams, the camp's director. "By the time parents get home from work, replies are in their inbox telling them what their camper did this morning or how the ropes course was this afternoon."

However, the system comes with a few challenges. Letters written in pink pen - a favorite among female campers don't scan well, and some of the male campers have to iron the wrinkles out of letters that have been stuffed in pockets.

With a dial-up Internet connection, uploading all of the photos takes some time, but the galleries have been "a huge hit," Adams said. The photos, however, sometimes open the kids up to parental scrutiny.

"We get great calls from parents asking 'Why is my daughter wearing the same shirt she wore yesterday?' and 'My son has a Band-Aid on his elbow - what happened?'" Adams said.

Many camps are going high-tech, according to the American Camp Association. This year, 82 percent of accredited camps have Web sites and 92 percent have e-mail addresses - up more

than 50 percent from five years ago.

Still, the majority of camps do not offer such tools, said Bette Bussel, executive director of the American Camp Association's New England chapter. Because camps have varying levels of technological involvement, families can choose which approach works best for them, she said.

Christopher Thurber, a psychologist who is spending his 26th summer at Camp Belknap in New Hampshire, said no technology is used at the camp except for the occasional stereo in the cabins. Kids write traditional letters to send home, and they save photos and stories to share with parents at the end of the summer.

"I think there is great value in bringing kids away from things they have the other 10 or 11 months out of the year," Thurber said. "Because the possibility exists to write a letter every day, some parents are writing four or five e-mails" a day.

He urges parents to "get out of the instant-message mode" and correspond with their campers two or three times a week. "That still promotes self-reliance and independence and cuts that digital umbilical cord."

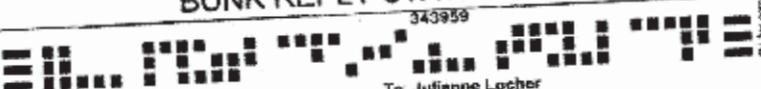
Ari Ackerman, founder and chief executive of Bunk1.com, agreed that campers should have limited access to technology. His company's service allows kids to write their letters on preprinted stationery with their parents' e-mail addresses encrypted into barcodes. The campers write letters and then pass them to counselors to fax to Bunk1.com, which scans the letters and sends them to parents' inboxes.

"It provides a one-way window into the child's world," he said. "Parents are on the computer, but kids are outside playing ball where they should be."

At Camp St. Charles, where Michelle and Danielle are finishing their stint, campers are not allowed to have cellphones, televisions or MP3 players. But most of the camp's 155 campers write home on Bunk1.com's stationery.

"Our kids are not anywhere near the technology," said Laura Hall, the camp's director. "We just offer the high-tech tools for the parents. I think it's the perfect balance: Parents get that quick turnover that technology offers and the kids get the back-to-nature break from technology."

BUNK REPLY STATIONERY
343959



From: Steve Locher
To: Julianne Locher
Camp: McGaw YMCA Camp Echo

Someone who loves you sent you the BUNK REPLY FORM. It works just like a fax. All you need to do is write a letter in the box below and hand it in with the rest of your mail. (Don't fold it or scribble it.) We will fax the form directly back to Bunk1 and on to whoever sent it to you. It's just like getting email and writing back, so write back as soon as you can! The faster you answer, the faster we can send it back. Write your message below.

Hi Dad,

I love that you are waiting to have cake. I really want some now!! My lizard is really cool. I am doing some fun art stuff. This week my campmates are Adv. arts crafts, sailing, and photo. They are all a lot of fun. My glasses will be fine. Guess what else I did in Archery? I made all 0 on the target and one of them was a bullseye. I love you sooo much. See you soon!

Love,
Julianne

P.S. I bought something for everyone!