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School's *In* for the Summer! Academic Camps Keep Kids Learning

By Teresa Carson

At a summer camp on the San Juan Islands, 12-year-old Brina Blackwell was stunned when a couple of mother orcas brought their calves right up to her canoe for a look.

"That really touched my daughter," says Brina's dad, Cotten Blackwell. For the Vancouver, Wash., teen, he adds, the camp, which is run by the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI), "was a life-changing experience."

Brina's close encounter is a perfect illustration of the incomparable hands-on educational experiences available to kids at academic summer camps.

What Is an Academic Camp?

Academic camps run the gamut from science – like those offered by OMSI, the Audubon Society and others – to writing, computer engineering, world languages and more. Some organizations, such as the Oregon Episcopal School (OES) and Saturday Academy, schedule a smorgasbord of academic offerings. Camp Invention, a national program held onsite at numerous local schools, is based on a STEM curriculum of science, technology, engineering and math. Even local parks departments offer camps that focus on education. Some are held in the great outdoors while others are held in museums, on school campuses, in computer labs and beyond.

But just because they're called "academic" camps, don't expect to find kids sitting quietly at desks doing worksheets all day.

"We call it sneaky learning," says Lauren Hostetler, camp director at the International School, which offers a variety of summer language immersion camps. Camp Invention is "hands-on, messy, loud and creative," adds regional consultant Stephanie Stortz. "There's no sitting still. This is not school. It's intense, and it's fun."

Brina Blackwell's 14-year-old sister, Maura, a veteran of language immersion and science camps, declares academic camps both fun *and* cool. Like her sister, she especially enjoys the OMSI San Juan Islands camps.

"You get to meet scientists who work with the orcas," she says. "They spend their lives studying them and you get to go out and watch the orcas with someone who knows so much about them."

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– Lauren Hostetler,
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At OMSI science camps, kids can explore a variety of unique biomes – including the San Juan Islands (left) and OMSI's own Hancock Field Station (right) near Fossil, Ore.

A Cure for Summer Brain Drain

While they don't focus on traditional classroom learning, academic camps do help ward off summer learning loss. "It's an opportunity to keep kids academically sharp," says Cotten Blackwell of the OMSI camps, "and they get a really deep experience, an authentic experience, of science."

"We have all day," adds Anne Armstrong, an outdoor education manager at OMSI. "We can take advantage of the teachable moments" without having to rush on to the next subject as so often happens in a typical school day.

Some camps, including Camp Invention, align their programs with state academic standards. Vancouver, Wash., mom Lindsay Kolar says her son, Ian, loved Camp

Invention so much she became a local coordinator. And Ian will be attending Camp Invention for the fifth time this year.

Ian especially enjoys the Camp Invention unit – repeated every year – where campers bring a broken appliance from home, take it apart and build something new. He's also invented several items to help his mom solve problems around the house, including a tool to dust those hard-to-reach spots. "He's so proud when I use it," Kolar says, "and I'm proud, too."

Another popular unit at Camp Invention is Planet Zak, in which campers crash land on a planet called Zak and have to design a space craft to leave. First, though, they have to build a shelter to protect themselves from Zak's acid rain. While surviving on the alien planet, campers learn problem solving, team work, science, engineering, math and more – but first and foremost, they have fun!

At language immersion camps, such as those offered by the International School, kids can maintain or build on their language skills as they play camp games, enjoy arts and crafts, go swimming, and stage or watch cultural programs.

"They do a super job of combining language and fun," says southeast Portland mom Kristine Petrillo. Her older child attends a Japanese immersion program at Portland's Richmond Elementary School and her younger child is in pre-kindergarten at the International School. Petrillo saw marked advancement in both children's Japanese skills over the summer, and both thoroughly enjoyed their International School camp experiences.

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– Maura Blackwell, 14



Above: Your video-game-obsessed kid can learn to design his or her own games at a game design summer camp, like this one at the Oregon Episcopal School.

Right: Colorful hats are just part of the Colombian Carnival celebration at the International School's summer Spanish camp.



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"It does help with school," Maura Blackwell says of attending academic camps. "It happens a lot. We'll be studying something at school and I realize I know this already." Sometimes, she adds, she isn't even conscious of how much she's learned at camp until she begins telling her parents about it.

More Reasons to Love Academic Camps

Academic camps typically employ a high caliber of "counselor" to work with campers – another benefit of sending children to these specialty camps. While many recreational summer camps hire high school or college students as counselors, campers at

OES, for example, might be instructed by a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkley. The International School's camp leaders all are teachers and native speakers.

Educational camps fall along a continuum. Some are quite academic, leaning more toward a summer school model. Others simply slip in a little learning while campers participate in

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*— Stephanie Stortz,
Camp Invention*

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Summer is a great time to take science outdoors, as in this Engineering Design camp at the Oregon Episcopal School.

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traditional camp activities such as swimming, arts and crafts, talent shows, hiking and more. The line between academics and recreation is often blurred. For example, while OMSI camps emphasize science, campers might do leaf rubbings and other art activities while learning about plants.

Like recreational camps, some academic programs are residential and some are held only during the day. Kids will make new friends just as they would at any camp, but at academic camps, especially those focused on specific skills or subject areas, they'll meet a lot more kids who share their interests or passions.

"We had one little kid who had memorized everything there is to know about sharks," adds Erin Roden, OMSI's outdoor education manager. "When he got to camp, he found lots of kids interested in sharks and realized, 'Hey, somebody out there is just like me!'"

Some camps, such as the Summer Enrichment Program offered by the University of Oregon, are targeted toward high-achieving students. Camp Invention is great for students who excel in school, but it's also ideal for students who "learn better if they can move around and make some noise," Stortz says. "Academic camps are not just for 'smart' kids."

Kids might even discover a life-long passion at an academic summer camp. According to Cotten Blackwell, 14-year-old Maura is considering a career in oceanography as a result of her OMSI San Juan experiences.

"But that wasn't the goal," he says. "Even if they don't become scientists, they'll be interested in the world around them. Seeing the orca calves like that, it opens you up to a sense of wonder and awe."

It's an opportunity to keep kids academically sharp, and they get a really deep experience, an authentic experience, of science.

— Cotten Blackwell, Vancouver, Wash., of OMSI science camps

Teresa Carson is a Portland freelance writer and mom.

Summer Camp - at School?

Some kids might roll their eyes at the idea of going to a camp that takes place at a school, but camp directors say there can be big advantages.

For example, attending camp on their own school campus allows kids to experience the school in a whole new way. No grades, tests or pressure — just fun. "Students from Oregon Episcopal School have the advantage of knowing their way around the campus and in some cases they may already know the instructor," adds Joan Lowe, Oregon Episcopal School (OES) director of summer programs.

Attending camp at a new school — perhaps a school the family is considering or one the child will attend in the future — is a good way to get a feel for an unfamiliar campus in a fun and unthreatening way.

"It's a great way for children to transition into our school," says Lauren Hostettler, the International School's camp director. "They can become familiar with the facilities and meet some kids who will be their classmates."

Even kids who will never attend the host school during the school year can benefit from a school-based camp. At the International School camp, for example, children from immersion programs around the area and those simply interested in other languages get a chance to learn and play with other kids who speak the same language.

Attending camp on a college campus can give your child a chance to get comfortable with the idea of college life, even if college is still several years away.

"They're living in the dorms, eating in the cafeteria and using the classrooms and labs," says Marjorie DeBuse, director of the University of Oregon's youth enrichment and talented and gifted programs. After experiencing camp at the university, attending college won't seem so intimidating when it rolls around.

The bottom line? Camps that are held on a school campus aren't intended to be like "summer school." "We get outside as much as possible," says Hostettler. "We give the summer camps a distinct feel that's different from the school year."

— Teresa Carson