

My testimony regarding the values of asthma camp
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I'll never forget.

Every year as part of the application process for sending a child off to the southern California asthma medical program camp (SCAMP Camp), we ask the parent to tell us information about their child's asthma, and how well-controlled it is. As medical director, I review these applications for approval.

One question on the application is: "How many days per week does your child wake up at night due to asthma?"

One year, a parent wrote in reply: "**8** days a week!".

There is nothing better than this response to help describe what it can be like to raise and take care of a child with asthma. You see, although asthma is a condition that sometimes (but fortunately, very rarely) kills you, it much more often ruins your day, and particularly your night. And despite the fact there are great medical ways of controlling this disease nowadays, there are still too many children out there waking up 8 nights a week. In other words, their quality of life "sucks", but it doesn't need to.

It is for this main reason I volunteer for camp, and have come back every year for the last 32 years, ever since I went off to my first camp during my Allergy-Immunology fellowship training at UCLA in 1979. I know that children with asthma and their families can lead pretty-close-to-normal lives, if properly directed and empowered, and given the right management tools.

There are other reasons. One has to do with the fact that as an allergist-immunologist, I take care of individual children and their families affected by asthma and try to make a difference in their lives, on a one-on-one basis. By donating my time to recruit, organize, plan and execute asthma camp, I feel I'm making a difference in a more "global" or community way. Helping over 200 children every summer to complete a fun-filled week of outdoor activities, while at the same time "sneaking in" some asthma education, attacks the problem of pediatric asthma with a broader stroke. Both small and broad strokes are needed.

Furthermore, involvement in asthma camp helps me do the proverbial "practice what I preach". I "preach" to the children (and their parents) who I see in my clinic, that once a child's asthma is under control and managed correctly, the child can be, and should be, considered normal, and able to do what all non-asthmatic children typically do: run, play, and participate in life to the fullest. Getting a child off to asthma camp to successfully experience hiking, swimming, boating, and just running around and having a good time, and for the parent to observe this, allows me to practice what I preach.

The direct benefits of a residential, overnight asthma camp program for children ages 8 to 13 years, and their families, are always hard to prove and establish. I was fortunate to be able to investigate as a researcher this question of whether children benefit from camp, a few years back in conjunction with the Consortium on Children's Asthma Camps. A survey was done, with the help of the Consortium, of over 1,700 children attending asthma camp throughout the USA, and it was found children who had attended asthma camp the previous year reported better use of asthma management tools, were more likely to be using asthma controller therapy, and had more responsibility for taking their medication. These objective findings were published in the literature for the world to be able to see proof of the value of sending kids off to camp (Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol. 2007 Dec;99(6):496-501. Clinical profile, health-related quality of life, and asthma control in children attending US asthma camps. Welch MJ, Carlson AM, Larson D, Fena P).

However, I feel there are other valuable aspects of asthma camp, which may even be more important than those mentioned above, but harder to measure objectively. 2 major and important positive psychological-type outcomes of camp seem to occur as a result of camp: confidence-building, and promotion of self-independence. Many children with significant asthma have been protected by their parents and have missed out on any "outside-of-home" overnight activities. For these children, being able to complete a 1 week away from home, and from their parents, represents a huge confidence-building step for the child. It helps promote or foster a degree of normal parental-child separation that may have been previously slow to develop because of the child's chronic health condition. Related to this, the asthma camp experience, if done right, creates an increase in a child's sense of independence, in particular, his or her ability to control their own asthma. Given not all children go on to "outgrow" their asthma, this type of skill is essential to allow them as a teenager, and perhaps even as an adult, be a better "manager" of their chronic disease. The hope here is that the child's sense of "locus of control" as it relates to their disease, becomes more inward (i.e. under the control of the child), and not outward (e.g. parental-controlled).

There are many positive spin-offs to an asthma camp program not necessarily directly related to the children who attend camp. I have seen over the years, various medical volunteers (pediatricians, school nurses, respiratory therapists) become better informed in how asthma should be controlled and managed through their asthma camp involvement. They do this because they rub shoulders with experts in pediatric asthma who are their co-volunteers. These improved asthma skills go with them as they return to their job which often involves caring for children with asthma, which in turn, leads to a positive impact on the overall care in the community for patients with asthma. These same volunteers often stay involved with the American Lung Association in other ways than camp, and go on to serve on committees, and carry out leadership roles that benefit the ALA.

I've come to appreciate over the years that asthma camp does not solve all the woes and problems of pediatric asthma – it is just one way to help-out families out who are impacted by this increasingly-common disease. If it helps obtain better asthma control – great. If it promotes independence on the part of the child, even better. However, if sending a kid off to camp simply allows the parent a short respite from the daily "grind" and burden of caring for a child with chronic asthma, this is fine with me.