



Hey kids, how about a vocation vacation?

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For Jennifer Porat, summer camp isn't about s'mores and canoe trips. It's about creating a runway collection and learning about the fashion industry.

This August, Jennifer, 13, and her younger sister are returning to a two-week day camp called CraftyCouture in Thornhill, Ont. Last summer, one of Jennifer's favourite projects was creating a clothing collection inspired by a fashion icon.

"We came up with a new fashion revolution: Harry Potter fashions, stylish Quidditch trends and a completely new take on the classic robe, skirt and button-down that makes up the Hogwarts uniform," the Thornhill teen says in an e-mail.

CraftyCouture, which ran its first camp in 2005, is one of a growing number of specialty camps tapping into children's increasingly sophisticated aspirations. The past five years have seen a spike in camps that offer a glimpse of a future career.

"Kids are really excited by them," says Agnes Stawicki, the managing editor of Our Kids Go to Camp magazine. And if they haven't already committed to a summer camp, this is the month to make a selection.

Parents can choose from camps where kids can watch veterinary surgery, make a claymation movie, program their own video game, or milk a cow.

Among the newest offerings is a dog-trainer camp run by Pawsitively Pets in Toronto. A small group of kids aged 10 to 14 are teamed with shelter dogs and a professional trainer. There's also a movie-marketing session run by The Director's Cut at various locations in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, and a journalism program at the Centauri arts camp in southern Ontario in which cub reporters "cover" the goings-on in the other sessions. At CraftyCouture, girls learn about everything from fashion styling to magazine art direction.

Calgary mother Janet Henderson says her boys, 6 and 8, have thrived at film camp, making spy movies and trailers. They're going back to the Director's Cut camp run at the University of Calgary this summer.

“I like the combination of technical and creative skills,” she says. “With technology being so prevalent in their world, the content of these courses are really exciting to the boys.”

Organic farming is another rising trend in the camp world. Demand for an organic-farm-apprenticeship camp in the Ottawa area has not only increased over the four years it’s existed, but has also drawn interest from other camps looking to boost their own programming with farm visits and food lessons, says Torry Reid of Canadian Organic Growers, who runs the camp.

Many parents say camps with a career flavour are a better way for kids to spend a summer than flipping burgers or making lattes – not that many of those jobs are even available in Canada.

Employment for teens has been on the decline for a years. Last summer, about 120,000 fewer full-time students were working than in 2008, according to Statistics Canada. The percentage of students working in the summer dropped to 43.8 per cent from 50.3 per cent.

Many camps also appeal to new Canadians for whom the tradition of camping in the woods is not as iconic. (And, in the case of Pawsitively Pets, camp offers parents a way to indulge a youngster’s interest in pets without having to buy or adopt one, founder Jennifer Ego says.)

Still, despite the targeted programming, camp directors say one of their jobs is to broaden kids’ horizons, not narrow them.

“We show them there’s so many different options of things you can do,” Ms. Ego says.

Toronto high-school student Zachary White’s hands-on stint at Pawsitively Pets’s vet camp last summer gave him the confidence to apply to vet technician programs for university next year. For him, the highlights of camp were watching pet exams, studying first aid and anatomy, and learning to deal with emergency situations with dogs. Having his own scrubs was a bonus.

“I got my own stethoscope at camp and learned how to use it. That was fun. We were always busy,” he recalls.

Keeping it fun is key, according to many in the camp world. Otherwise, camp starts to look a lot like summer school.

“You can’t have a meaningful experience for youth unless that fun element is there,” says Troy Glover, a recreation professor at the University of Waterloo who researches the effects of summer camps. “I get a bit concerned when parents are more interested in giving their kids that experience that’s going to give them that edge in employability, especially at a young age.”

Experts suggest looking for camps that incorporate some downtime.

At The Director’s Cut, for instance, time is allotted for straight-up games and pie-in-the-face fun. Ottawa’s organic farming camp is not all Michael Pollan lectures and harvesting vegetables.. Desserts there include, yes, almost-all-organic s’mores around a campfire (if anyone has a lead on organic marshmallows, Ms. Reid is looking.)

And even though kids may be learning about potential careers, some of the most popular offerings speak to the yearnings of children. A stop-motion animation camp asks youngsters to bring in their own toys to star. And puppies and kittens as the organizing principle of a pet camp? A no-brainer. This isn't accountant camp.

As Jennifer's mother Rahle Porat sees it, her daughters may go on to careers in fashion, but for now, fashion camp has a more immediate appeal.

"It's the summer. I want them to do things they like."

SO YOU WANNA BE A....

If a summer camp in the woods isn't your kid's thing this year, here are a few programs that will let him or her try on a day job for size.

Fashion stylist

CraftyCouture, Thornhill, Ont., and Toronto

www.craftycouture.com

Astronaut

Space Camp, Laval, Que.

www.cosmodome.org

Dog trainer

Pawsitively Pets, Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver

www.pawsitivelypetskidscamp.com

Film marketer

Director's Cut, 30 locations across the country

www.thedirectorscut.ca

Journalist

Centauri Arts Camp, Niagara Region

www.centauriartscamp.com

Engineer

Da Vinci Engineering Enrichment Program (DEEP), University of Toronto

www.outreach.engineering.utoronto.ca/pdx

Video-game designer

The Arcade Bunker, University of British Columbia

www.ubccamps.ca/speciality

Toy designer

Design Exchange, Toronto.

www.dx.org

Organic farmer

Youth food and farm apprenticeship camp, Ottawa and Stittsville, Ont. (Canadian Organic Growers and Glebe Community Centre)

www.gnag.ca