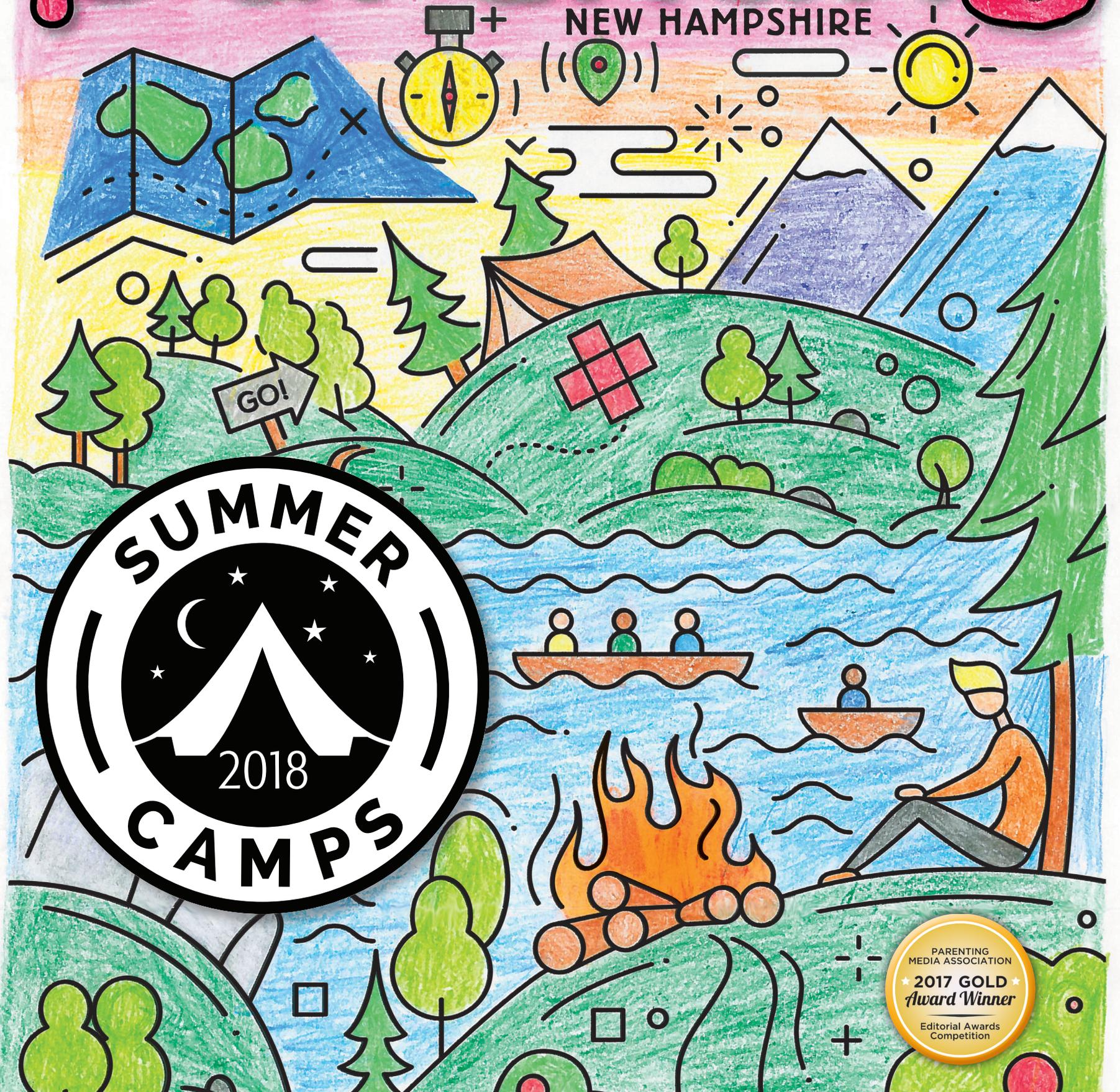


parenting

NEW HAMPSHIRE



The amazing ‘secret menu’ camps don’t advertise

The unexpected benefits of camp are some of the best reasons to attend

By Emily Golinsky

Camp directors work hard to portray the benefits their camp can provide to children.

Camp offers the opportunity to make friends, to experience the outdoors, to “just be a kid” for a little while, to learn a hobby or sport...the list goes on and on. It’s printed on the brochure, posted on the website, talked about during introductory visits. But what stretches the list even further is the intangible and often unanticipated “gifts of learning” that attending summer camp can give your child and your family. These might not be boldly splashed across a flyer, but they’re just as real.

Flexibility isn’t optional. How quickly we learn to adapt, adjust and accept change when our hiking trip gets called off due to thunderstorms. The game created while huddled in the tent, using whatever is at hand – two camp mugs, three stones and a rolled-up pair of socks – becomes a fun way to spend an hour where at home the weather might have been an excuse for whining about being bored while stuck in the house. Camp teaches kids that life isn’t predictable, and to make the best of a less than ideal situation.

Find common ground. It’s nearly impossible to spend days and weeks in the company of peers without needing to navigate disagreements. In the camp community, where bullying isn’t only not allowed, it is actively “uncool,” campers quickly learn they will not want to be friends with everyone, but you do need to find a way to co-exist. Campers build conflict management skills that will be valuable their whole lives through actively practicing the ability to find common ground and being a positive member of the group.

(Most) spiders won’t kill you. A ladybug landed on your backpack. It’s adorable (please stop screaming)! And, even if there is a Daddy Long Legs lurking in your cubby, all he’s doing is keeping you from getting another mosquito bite. Seeing firsthand what happens when humans take over natural spaces of other species – and learning to live with creepy crawlies – imparts in children a sense of duty for protecting and positively interacting with the environment.



Everyone can sing and dance. Singing is not just for Grammy Award-winning acts and most people never make it on *Dancing With the Stars*. No matter how untrained your voice or your feet, it’s impossible to worry about skill when you and 100 others are singing about soggy moose who spilled their juice or when your group is dancing around your table in the dining hall to celebrate a friend’s birthday. Nowhere is the life lesson of learning to “dance like no one is watching” taught better than it is at camp.

Finding appreciation. Sometimes, without meaning to, kids take for granted what they have, both tangible and intangible. When food appears on the table every day, kids don’t always stop to think and thank the person who shopped for it, prepared it (and likely will clean it up). On a camp-out night, however, your child becomes part of a group responsible for collecting the firewood, starting a fire, prepping the food, cooking for everyone, and cleaning up to “leave no trace” – a process

that can take a couple hours for a basic meal. As they take on responsibilities for things that get done for them at home, children learn that the love, attention and care provided by a parent may be their “job,” but it still deserves a thank you.

So when your camper comes home from camp, their trunk will be full with more than just dirty clothes and archery awards. They will carry home with them life skills and a greater awareness of the world around them, and even of their place in that world. Don’t be surprised. Take it in stride and act like you knew it all along (after all, that’s why you sent them to camp, right?!). Then, take the next step and talk with your camper about how to incorporate their newfound abilities and experiences into the school year and home. You’ll both be impressed with where the secret benefits of camp can take you. **PNH**

Emily Golinsky is the executive director of Camp Starfish in Rindge.