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Parks Canada's Learn to Camp Program:

Providing tools for urban families to enjoy nature

Learn to Camp Program

Background

An increasing number of Canadians live in urban centres, far away from National Parks, other protected places and the recreational opportunities they provide. Research suggests that families with young children and newcomers to Canada face many barriers to visiting these places, and participating in activities such as camping in Canada's outdoors. These barriers include a lack of awareness of opportunities, equipment and knowledge, and the proximity of locations.

In June 2011, Parks Canada, in collaboration with Mountain Equipment Coop (MEC) and local partners, launched the *Learn to Camp* program in ten urban centres across Canada. Aimed at newcomers to Canada and young families, the program focused on overcoming barriers to camping and spending time in the outdoors.

Camping equipment was provided for participants and workshops ranging from camp set-up to safety and ethics were held to give families the opportunity to learn about different aspects of camping during the overnight events. On top of the "nuts and bolts" of camping, the program was designed to give participants the opportunity to unplug and explore nature in a fun, safe environment.

These hands-on workshops were complimented by an online tool on the Parks Canada website to support new campers.

Program Reflections:

Learn to Camp Programs in the Lower Mainland

At the national and local levels, initial evaluations show *Learn to Camp* programs were very well-received and have exceeded program goals.

"Michelle came to Canada in December, 2009. She has a six-year-old son, and her husband is still in China. When she came to see me to join the Host Program, she shared her concern about her son, and she was eager to learn about the Canadian way of parenting. Whatever she did, she felt unsure about her way of disciplining her son. She got a Canadian host volunteer, and started realizing that all the parents are facing the same problems about raising children, no matter where they are from. She feels more relaxed now and she's adjusting to the new life day by day. The **camping experience she had was special, and she fully enjoyed 'Canadian experience' with her son** and other participants.

Clients from the Host Program – 4 families from China, Iran, Russia, and Korea joined the camp, and there are many stories behind them too. **One client felt depressed recently, but this camp experience helped her to lift up her feelings**. All the participants must have **had a great time and become confident in themselves.**"
-S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Program Coordinator, Burnaby

Lessons Learned and Future Directions:

Learning to Experience Nature is in Demand

- With minimal advertising for the first Lower Mainland event at Fort Camping in Brae Island Regional Park, the program was fully registered (100 people) with a wait-list of fifty people within one week.
- Due to popular demand, a second *Learn to Camp* was held at Fort Langley National Historic Site in August.
- The family-focus for this program makes it unique.
- Based on feedback, *Learn to Camp* along with other types of "*Learn to*" programs (such as canoeing or mountain biking) will take place in 2012.

Figure 1. Word cloud from *Learn to Camp* participants based on their favourite experiences during the *Learn to Camp* programs in Fort Langley (www.wordle.net)

The Strength of Partnering

- Parks Canada worked with MEC, Metro Vancouver Parks, S.U.C.C.E.S.S. (immigrant support services), Fort Camping, and Kwantlen First Nation to develop and host the *Learn to Camp* workshops in the Lower Mainland.
- The programming highlighted the strengths of each organization, which brought diverse expertise to the program.
- Programming will continue to engage partners into the future.

Experiential and Place-Based Learning is Key

- Participants gained confidence through having the opportunity to set-up their own equipment and try their hands at camp cooking.
- Future programs should provide further experiential activities, and give participants more time to explore and discover the place on their own.

Learn to Camp Links with Healthy By Nature Principles

1) *Spending time in nature improves human health.*

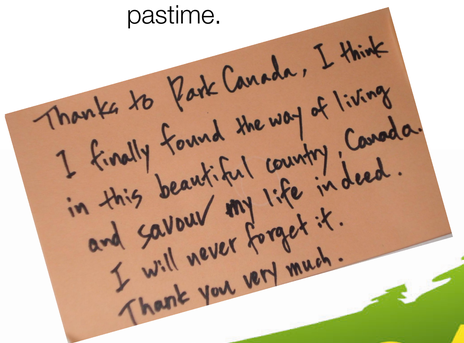
Several participants shared that they experienced an improvement in their confidence and mental well-being as a result of the *Learn to Camp* program. One family revealed that *Learn to Camp* was the first weekend since they had moved to Canada one year ago that their children had not fought.

2) *Human health depends on healthy ecosystems.*

The *Learn to Camp* program is designed to foster a sense of connection to, and responsibility for the environment. Participants were taught how to enjoy camping with minimal impact.

3) *Parks and protected areas contribute to vibrant, healthy communities.*

Participants were able to meet people from throughout the region to learn together and share their first camping experience as a group. Many people commented on how their experience with *Learn to Camp* helped them feel part of the community, and are now able to enjoy a truly Canadian pastime.



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