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What a child needs in the summer: Play, growth and belonging

Close your eyes for a second and think back to a summer from your own childhood. Not a whole season, just one memory. Maybe it's the smell of a bug spray and sunscreen mix. Maybe it's a popsicle melting faster than you could eat it, or the sting of pavement on bare feet, or the sound of a screen door slapping shut behind you as you ran out to find your friends. Maybe it's a cottage dock, a campfire, a bike ride that lasted until the streetlights came on.

Whatever it is, chances are it involves a place, a person, or a feeling of being free to explore and figure out who you were becoming.

That is what summer is supposed to mean for kids. It should make room for fun, rest, play, and a little freedom.

But freedom is only half of what a good summer offers. The other half is growth, just a different kind than the classroom gives.

Think of it this way: school teaches what kids have to learn. Summer teaches what they get to discover. It's the season kids get to try things without a mark attached to them, and find out what's in them that a report card isn't designed to measure.

They are still learning. Just different things, in different ways.

The challenge is that not every child gets that kind of summer. Not every family has a cottage to disappear to for the season, or the money for a full slate of camps. Not every child has transportation, or a flexible parent. And yet the need doesn't shrink to fit the budget or the circumstance. Kids still need somewhere to belong. They still need safe adults, new experiences, and room to grow.

That access shouldn't be a luxury. It's part of why we chose to build Streams as a charity in the first place: so we could galvanize the power of community to make that access possible for kids of every background. And it's why we chose the arts as our way to connect. Art, music, drama, and creativity give kids a low-pressure door into that kind of discovery, one that doesn't require a tryout or a fee they can't afford.

This summer that looks like more than a dozen weekly camps running from July through August, open to kids from four all the way to seventeen. Some weeks it's clay and sculpture, others it's stop motion, band, drama, or a STEAM lab. There's a camp for the kid who wants to make a mess and a camp for the teen who wants to take the stage. And because access matters as much as variety, subsidies and scholarships are available for any family who needs them.

But some of the most important people at Streams this summer aren't the campers. They're the teenagers running the room. A good number of our summer staff and volunteers came through our own camps as kids, and now they're the ones leading them. That matters more than it might seem. A sixteen year old remembers what it's like to be nine in a way most adults have forgotten. They know which jokes land, which kid is quietly overwhelmed, which activity needs five more minutes. Watching a former camper become this year's counsellor is, in a lot of ways, the whole point of what we're building.

We believe summer should offer children and youth more than something to do. It should offer them a place to be. Somewhere they can laugh, make a mess, try something new, and be encouraged by an adult who is paying attention.

And communities have a role to play in that. The kind of summer a child has isn't determined by their family alone. It's shaped by what a community makes possible, by the spaces it creates and the access it offers, by whether it believes all kids deserve to be not just supervised, but genuinely delighted in.

So as this summer unfolds, maybe the question isn't only how we keep kids busy. It's how we help them come alive.

If you're looking for that kind of summer for your child, I hope you'll consider a space like Streams. And if you believe every child deserves that chance, whether or not their family can pay for it, our One of 1,000 monthly giving campaign is one of the simplest

ways to help make it possible.

Because a good summer doesn't just rest a child. It reveals who they are.

This week's Community Voice submission was written by Juli-Anne James, executive director of Streams Community Hub. To learn more or get connected with Streams, please visit streamshub.org