

Pointers For Parents

goCyberCamp: Web Site Blends Learning, Fun And Technology

(NAPSA)—Parents who want their children to use the Internet safely—and to learn while having fun—may want to pitch their tent at goCyberCamp™, a new Web site that lets kids “camp out” all year long.

goCyberCamp—funded by the AT&T Family Care Development Fund and developed at the Center for 4-H Youth Development, part of the University of Minnesota Extension Service—is an online learning environment that provides children with a window to the outdoors and camp culture in educational but game-like settings. It also allows them to interact with other “campers” who are registered to use the site. The program initially was designed to help children who have never been to camp become familiar with nature and camp routines—such as campfire safety and traditional camp songs—through activities that blend learning, fun and technology.

The Web site requires no special software, so registered campers can access it anytime and anywhere. They need only “hike” across the keyboard and bring their own sleeping bag and marshmallows. Access is limited to registered, authenticated campers and staff in order to provide a safe online environment. The program provides both online and offline activities that are easy to integrate with school-age childcare programs. Children can also access the site from home during out-of-school time. Special online programming



Children can learn and have fun while “camping out” at a new Web site.

will be available during planned school breaks when ordinary childcare arrangements and activities may be extended.

goCyberCamp is a non-commercial Web site: No advertisements or banners are used, and no commercial products are incorporated into the games and activities. It is also a “closed site,” meaning there are no links to other external Web sites. Additional security for campers is provided through “bots,” computer programs that automatically monitor the online interactions to prevent inappropriate language, for example.

“The beauty of goCyberCamp is that children can participate as ‘virtual campers’ from wherever they are,” says Mirian Graddick-Weir, executive vice president for human resources at AT&T, “at home, an after-school program, the library, a community center or local YMCA, grandma’s house, or

some other place with access to the Internet.”

“Young people today need safe environments that can challenge and engage them in new ways,” said Dr. Dale Blyth, associate dean for youth development at the University of Minnesota. “We believe goCyberCamp is a unique way to bring 4-H’s long tradition of exciting, hands-on learning into cyberspace.”

Once they’ve registered, campers can enter the online “camp entrance” (Main Lodge) and choose which area of the camp they want to visit—such as Meadow, Lake or Woods. Activities in each area combine learning with plenty of fun and creativity—with no danger of stepping on snakes or getting bug bites. Each activity takes 12 to 15 minutes to complete—for example, learning about swimming and canoeing techniques.

Campers can also elect to become part of a virtual cabin—that is, a small group of children and an adult camp counselor that meets online regularly. These cabins are meant to foster some of the camaraderie children would experience at an actual summer camp. Counselors are recruited from various organizations, universities and businesses based on their experience, content expertise and interest in working with children online. They also must pass background and reference checks.

Campers and care providers can sign up to join goCyberCamp free of charge at <http://gocybercamp.org>.