Can teens benefit from summer camp?

Younger children certainly benefit from all the summer-camp experience has to offer — and parents benefit from having a quality program for their children to experience while they work or take care of family business. But tweens and teens, though they don’t require child care, can benefit from camp as well.

Elizabeth Paravicini, director of Summer Art Academy Art Camp in Valley Village, says leadership and counselor-in-training programs, offered by many camps, can help teens build friendships and deal with common issues such as conflict resolution and bullying. “That age tends to be a little awkward sometimes,” she says. “It becomes a safe forum where they get to talk amongst their peers.”

But counselor-in-training programs also give kids some work experience. In addition to a personal workshop and leadership classes, teens in the program at Art Camp assist in two classes with younger campers and prepare all the themed activities. “They want to help others. That’s what I’ve noticed the trend is,” Paravicini says.

Some teens, though, could use a break. Three years ago, Paravicini noticed this and launched a program that lets teens just be campers. Because the camp has two sessions, teens can have both experiences in one summer.
Teens who attend camp also benefit from a chance to explore — at a crucial time. Lucretia Williams, a former college consultant who is now head of New Roads School in Santa Monica, says students often begin reflecting on themselves and what they want to do in the second semester of 11th grade. That is far too late. "I think the summer gives them the opportunity to do that outside the demands and pressures of an academic environment," he says. In summer, teens can feel more free to take risks, and even explore interests that might turn into a career.

"I think we live with a very risk-averse generation," says Williams. "They have been pushed so much to build a resume rather than to be children and just explore. That's what our summer programs are about, to explore."

Even programs that have an academic focus can offer teens a break from routine, and help take the pressure off. At The Neilson Academy in Los Angeles, the vibe is so different that for many teens it's like a break. "There's no pressure in the summer," says founder Linda Neilson. "They can get help whenever they need it." Teens attending the summer session can address problems from the previous year — making up credits or raising a less-than-stellar grade — or work to prepare for the coming year.

"Every program is tailored to each student," Neilson says. "We take care of each other." With sessions lasting just three hours a day, teens have plenty of time for other summer fun. And because they are taking care of their academic business with plenty of support, they are relaxed enough to enjoy themselves.

During that free time, Neilson advocates finding an additional program that will help your teen explore other interests and give them a break from screen time and technology. "Staying at home is not a solution," she says. "They're on their phones or they're on their iPads."