

Kids have a 'virtual' ball at eCamp

July 19, 2009, Sarah Sechan

The 93 children at eCamp wake up at 7 to begin their day of games, sport, PC-building, robotics and flash animation.

eCamp, located at the Alonei Yitzhak Youth Village near Binyamina, offers kids aged eight through 17 a traditional Jewish overnight camp experience coupled with a state-of-the-art technology education and adventure, all "fully in English and Hebrew."

"We heard about eCamp from an e-mail," said Guy, 12, from Mevasseret Zion, "and it talked about a lot of spectacular things. I love technology and I'm building a PC."

Contacted by *The Jerusalem Post* last week, on their third day of camp, the youngsters were very excited about the rest of the 12-day session.

"After breakfast, we take three workshops," said Michael, 15, from Maryland. "I'm taking flash animations, video editing - we're planning a big video and a show, and the equipment is really neat."

"It's really different than other camps that I go to," said Lihi, from New York. "Here we learn and have fun and meet a lot of new people, but in New York we know a lot of the people already. Here it's a different experience, it's in a different country, and we have a lot of fun."

"Kids come to see Israel for the summer; they've been doing it for years," said Marjie Hadad, eCamp's media liaison. "Not only do you get the Israel experience, but you get the camp experience, you can meet kids from all over the world, and learn something."

Now in its second year, eCamp is the brainchild of Dotan Tamir, who decided to found it after a trip to the United States.

"I went to America a few years ago to work as a counselor at a computer camp and I was exposed to the beautiful experience of camps in America, and I decided that I wanted to give Israeli kids the opportunity to have this experience. The idea then came to me to bring Jewish kids from all over the world to Israel and show them that Israel is not only war and politics and

religion, but that it is also hi-tech and innovation," Tamir said.

In addition to the workshops and regular camp activities such as sports and campfires, eCamp hosts special events, including a startup market, where Israeli companies let campers try their products.

"On Sunday, we are traveling to ISCAR, in the [Western Galilee's] Tefen Industrial Park, where a group from the First Robotics Competition is coming with their giant robot to present it to the kids. In the evening, the kids are going to have a laser tag competition in the woods," Tamir said.

He brings in counselors from both Israel and abroad.

"I served in the same army unit as Dotan," said Matan Zohar, one of the counselors, "and I found out about eCamp through him."

A Web and graphic designer with more than four years of experience, Zohar helped build the camp's curriculum.

Tamar Nevo, another counselor, heard about eCamp through the Oranim Educational Initiative, which, in addition to operating many Taglit-birthright groups, runs eCamp under its auspices.

"I went on a birthright Oranim trip two years ago, and I came back this year to staff eCamp," Nevo said. "I majored in digital media design at the University of Pennsylvania, so eCamp is a perfect fit for me."

This year, eCamp is partnering with Mifgash, the Ambassadors for Partnership Israel summer program. Uniting the Partnership 2000 cities of Philadelphia and Netivot, 2009's Mifgash has 20 American and 20 Israeli children touring Israel together from July 14 to July 26, and then attending eCamp's second session from July 27 to August 7, along with 80 other youngsters.

eCamp provides children the unique experience of working together with kids of very different ages.

"I find everything not so easy, but it is fun and I think I can do it," said Noa, nine.

"At eCamp, age doesn't matter," Hadad said.