

There'll be no tent for God at Camp Dawkins

Camp Quest

Camp Quest, which was founded as an alternative to Christian camps, will teach children about evolution

Britain's most prominent non-believer is backing its first atheist summer camp for children.

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WHEN schoolchildren break up for their summer holidays at the end of next month, India Jago, aged 12, and her brother Peter, 11, will be taking a vacation with a twist.

While their friends jet off to Spain or the Greek islands, the siblings will be hunting for imaginary unicorns in Somerset, while learning about moral philosophy. The Jagos, from Basingstoke, Hampshire, are among 24 children who will be taking part in Britain's first summer camp for atheists.

The five-day retreat is being subsidised by Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist and author of *The God Delusion*, and is intended to provide an alternative to faith-based summer camps normally run by the Scouts and Christian groups.

Crispian Jago, an IT consultant, is hoping the experience will enrich his two children.

"I'm very keen on not indoctrinating them with religion or creeds," he said this weekend. "I would rather equip them with the tools to learn how to think, not what to think."

While afternoons at the camp will involve familiar activities such as canoeing and swimming, the youngsters' mornings will be spent debunking supernatural phenomena such as the formation of crop circles and telepathy. Even Uri Geller's apparent ability to bend spoons with his mind will come under scrutiny.

The emphasis on critical thinking is epitomised by a test called the Invisible Unicorn Challenge. Children will be told by camp leaders that the area around their tents is inhabited by two unicorns. The activities of these creatures, of which there will be no physical evidence, will be regularly discussed by organisers, yet the children will be asked to prove that the unicorns do not exist. Anyone who manages to prove this will win a £10 note - which features an image of Charles Darwin, the father of evolutionary theory - signed by Dawkins, a former professor of the public understanding of science at Oxford University.

"The unicorns are not necessarily a metaphor for God, they are to show kids that you can't prove a negative," said Samantha Stein, who is leading next month's camp at the Mill on the Brue outdoor activity centre close to Bruton, Somerset.

"We are not trying to bash religion, but it encourages people to believe in a lot of things for which there is no evidence."

Stein, 23, a postgraduate psychology student from London, was inspired to work at an atheist summer camp in America after reading *The God Delusion*, the bestselling book that sealed Dawkins's reputation as Britain's most prominent non-believer. Stein is now helping to bring the US concept, called Camp Quest, to Britain as an alternative to faith-based children's retreats.

The Scout Association, which has 500,000 members who collectively spend 2m nights camping out each year, is Britain's biggest organiser of children's camps. All new Scouts - whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim or from another religious background - are required to pledge to do their "duty" to their god or faith. Atheism, however, is not accounted for in this induction oath.

Christian organisations that run summer camps include the Church Pastoral Aid Society, an evangelical group, which operates 100 schemes attended by about 9,000 children.

Camp Quest was founded in America, where Bible classes and Christian retreats are widespread, by Edwin Kagin, an atheist lawyer from Kentucky.

Since launching in 1996, Camp Quest operates at six different US sites, with a new camp due to open in Florida at Christmas.

Amanda Metskas is currently supervising 71 children at a Camp Quest project in Clarkesville, Ohio. Her classes include a session called

Socrates Cafe, which debates issues such as definitions of knowledge, art and justice. "We teach them that even people like Sir David Attenborough are religious sceptics," said Metskas.

Kagin, 68, the son of a church minister, will be visiting the camp in Somerset next month. "Richard Dawkins has made a contribution towards the setting up of the camp in England, but I think now the idea has a momentum of its own," he said.

A week-long stay at the Mill on the Brue Activity Centre normally costs more than £500, but parents who have booked their children on the Camp Quest package are paying £275. Next year Stein hopes to run atheist camps at Easter and during school half-term breaks.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article6591231.ece>