Sending little Mark and Margaret off to Italian camp is no easy task, but maybe they’ll become Marco and Margherita. How do you convince them to “eat their carrots” and go to camp even if they don’t think they’ll understand a word at first? For starters, mention all the delicious foods they already know and enjoy. “The carrots” in Italian cuisine aren’t carrots, but pizza, pasta and tiramisù.

My mom pushed me on to the camp bus kicking and screaming when I was just six years old; I came home transformed. I realized all the other kids were equally overwhelmed, so we became fast friends in this mysterious place. From Italian day camp to overnight camp in the north woods, kids will form friendships that will last until the following summer when they reunite. If the kids keep up with their language during the year, they will leapfrog into higher levels of proficiency. With the magic of the Internet when not at camp, they can discover more cultural curiosities about Italy and many ways to learn the language.

As a parent now, I know how tough it is to send my three kids to language camp and hope for the best. I worry that I’ll receive a “hello mudduh, hello fadduh” letter lamenting everything, but maybe they’ll send a “Cara mamma e papa” letter trumpeting the joys of this mini version of Italy.

All that effort I spent on pushing Italian art and culture on my kids at home seemed futile until they heard about it from a young counselor from Italy. Suddenly, opera is cool and Botticelli is beautiful. A reenactment of the Palio, Siena’s dangerous horse race around its Piazza del Campo, is hilarious, and why not put on some sheets and spoof the senators assassinating Julius Caesar on the steps of Pompey’s theatre? Oh, and then there are those gladiator battles. What kid can resist that?

Italian camp is full of music. Maybe the cool counselors will share the latest Giovanotti hit, so the kids can sing “Ciao mamma guarda come mi diverto!” The kids will keep singing these songs even if they don’t quite understand all the words.

The goal of a good Italian camp is to move beyond teaching colors and numbers by using games and activities to put their limited language skills to use. Keeping the kids active and off their addictive screens will show them that learning Italian is about fun and friends.

The kids are tricked into learning culture, art and, yes, language. Through full immersion and casual interactions in Italian, they discover after a week or two that they do indeed know those basics of conversation.

Suddenly, Italian heritage is interesting to these kids. What region do we come from? What are the monuments there? Why did our relatives leave? Soon, the kids want to perfect their Italian and someday travel back to the homeland and visit any relatives left there.

Then it comes time to leave. Just as the kids were shocked on the first day, they can’t believe they have to leave their newfound friends. “They cry when they arrive and they cry when they leave,” one of the counselors says. They vow to return the next summer for more Italian.

Over my years running the Italian Concordia Language Village, Lago del Bosco, I’ve seen dozens of kids return year after year and eventually study in Italy for a year. Several have found jobs — or sweethearts — while abroad. One even landed a position at the Vatican translating for its newspaper. Many return home to share their experiences with the next round of bambini whose parents or grandparents signed them up for Italian summer camp. The cycle begins all over again.

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