

Children and Summer Camp: Tips for Parents

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Over 10 million children go to summer camp each year. For most, it's a fun and rewarding experience full of challenges and excitement. In addition to physical and athletic activities, kids learn about independence, cooperation, competition and teamwork. They also learn that they can survive away from home.

For many children, summer camp is also a time of significant emotional growth, development and transition. Parents often note that their children come home seeming older or more mature than before they left.

Although most children are excited about going to summer camp, for some, it can be a scary or anxiety provoking experience. In general, parents shouldn't push or force kids to go to camp if they feel frightened or uncomfortable.

The following tips are designed to help parents prepare their kids for summer camp and deal with issues that may arise:

1. Choose a camp that's suited to your child's personality, temperament and interests. If your child likes music, art or horseback riding, it makes sense to pick a camp with strengths in that area. At the same time, there's nothing wrong with encouraging kids to try new things or to have a variety of experiences. But in general, it's best not to force kids to do things at camp that they really dislike or simply can't do. Repeated negative experiences can have a significant effect on a child's self-esteem.
2. Involve your child in choosing the camp. Review brochures, videos and websites together. Ask for the names of other families you and your child can talk to about the camp.
3. Don't push kids to go to camp at too early an age. The "right" age will vary from child to child. Some kids are "ready" for "sleepaway" camp at 5 or 6, while others wouldn't even consider the idea at 14 or 15. If a child doesn't seem ready for a full summer away, consider a camp which has one month sessions. It may be an easier transition and a more positive experience.
4. If your child is shy, consider a camp where they know and like at least one other person their own age. Having one friend makes it easier to meet other kids.

5. Make sure kids know what to expect at camp. Walk them through the daily routine. If you choose a camp that's driving distance, consider an off season visit to help familiarize your child with the setting. It's not unlike visiting a new school with your child.
6. Let kids help with the packing. Encourage them to bring favorite toys, books, music or other reminders of home such as photos or even favorite foods, if allowed by the camp. If you went to camp as a child, you can also share your own memories, stories, and experiences.
7. If kids have issues or problems with other campers, encourage them to try and work things out themselves before intervening. Suggest that they ask a counselor or the camp director for help or suggestions. Remember, part of camp is about learning how to deal with new people and different situations.
8. Don't be surprised if your child gets "homesick". It's a normal reaction to being away from family and friends, especially for the first time. Don't criticize a child who feels homesick at camp. Telling them to "buck up" can sometimes make them feel worse. Instead, try and be supportive, reassuring and consistent. Tell them you understand that it's hard to be away from home, and that you miss them, too. Try and focus on intermittent goals, like Visiting Day or special camp events. Regular, scheduled and predictable phone contact may also be helpful. For most kids, episodes of homesickness pass within a few days.
9. If homesickness persists or seems severe, or if your child seems truly unhappy, talk to the camp director. Is your child having a particular problem with another child or a counselor? Is there an activity or expectation which is causing difficulties? Are they being pushed to do things beyond their level or capacity, like long distance swimming or extended hikes? Or is it just the wrong setting for your child? In the end, trust your instincts. If you're really convinced it's just not working out, don't be afraid to let your child come home. It's not the end of the world for you or for your child, and it's better than being truly miserable or unhappy for an entire summer.
10. Help children keep in touch with friends from summer camp. Plan times for them to get together with kids who live nearby. For friends who live at a distance, letters, phone calls and e-mail can help them maintain contact during the school year.

Most kids enjoy camp. They often look forward to returning year after year. However, careful camp selection, preparation and planning can increase the likelihood of a positive experience.

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