

Separation Concerns and Summer Camp

by Regina Skyer

It is not uncommon for first-time campers, and sometimes returning campers, to experience fears, concerns and even full-blown panic about leaving home and going to sleep away camp. This pre-camp reaction can present itself in a variety of ways. Some children refuse to acknowledge that they are going to camp. Others become visibly anxious and nervous, clinging to their parents, grandparents and anyone else who will listen to them. Some start acting immaturely – sucking their thumbs, using baby talk or even bed-wetting. They are trying to convince their parents that they have made a mistake and that (the children) are really not ready for sleep away camp. Because many children don't have adequate peer relationships, home is their safe haven and the thought of being away is understandably frightening.

The Good News. The good news is that these reactions are transient, and the far-reaching benefits of an overnight camp experience far outweigh the fears. As with all other difficult developmental tasks, when mastered, this experience leads to personality growth, social independence and maturity. Nevertheless, knowing this does not necessarily help your anxious youngster in the midst of his/her difficulty. Therefore, following are some suggestions designed to help both you and your child handle separation anxieties.

Acknowledge your youngster's concerns. Don't dwell on these or fuel them with your own separation problems or fears. An example of what to say is, "I know you are scared about going off to camp, that's a normal feeling, but I know you are going to have a wonderful time. Think about the great activities – the go-carts, swimming, the lake, that neat wood shop and the tree house."

Deal with the tug on the heartstrings questions. These include such questions as: "What do I do if I feel sick?" or "Who will talk to me if I feel lonely?" or "Who will tuck me in at night?" or "What if nobody likes me?" These questions generally have their intended effect –you the parent now begin to panic and have the same doubts as your child! The suggested answer to questions like this is: "You don't have to worry... that's why we chose this camp, they know just how to deal with this. You will have great counselors who will be with you all the time. If you feel sick, there's a nurse and a doctor. If you need a hug, there are lots of people around. As for your not being liked, that's what camp is all about. You'll learn how to make and keep friends, and that's what this camp specializes in."

Keep those letters coming. Parents and relatives should write every day and start the letters at least one week before departure. Letters should be short and, if possible, funny. Ask questions about camp; this focuses the letter away from home. Funny cards and picture postcards are great and much easier to send, since there isn't always much to say. Letters should not be too newsy since a child can feel like they are missing out on something. Don't tell your child how much you miss him or her or how much your life has come to a halt in his or her absence. Short declarations of love like, "We're so proud of you," or " Love you,"

or "See you real soon," are fine. Putting a small gift in the letter is another good idea. Some examples are: baseball cards, stickers, a cute pen or pencil, a note pad, a copy of the comics, or any item that you know your child would enjoy.

Photographs. Yes, send your child to camp with a family photograph, including the family pet. Pack this in the trunk or knapsack and show your child where it is. For some children this type of transitional object can help to minimize homesickness.

The Panic Reaction. If your child insists that he or she is not going, and that you shouldn't waste your time packing, shopping or preparing, don't react. Acknowledge the concern and move on. "I know you're scared, but this is a decision we, your parents, have made." Change the topic and get on with the day.

Departure Day. Goodbyes should be short and sweet, and the wailing grandmothers should be left home. If one parent tends to be more emotional than the other, suggest that the parent remain a fair distance from the bus. It also is not a good idea to get on the bus with your child.

These are just a few suggestions that hopefully will help both you and your child as you prepare for a wonderful experience. Good luck and happy camping to all.

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