

## **A SPECIAL SECTION FOR NEW CAMPER PARENTS**

So you have registered for camp and it is just around the corner. Now what?

Preparing for camp is both a physical and emotional activity. The physical is easy. This Family Guide contains materials to help get you physically ready for camp – what to bring, what not to bring, activity sign-ups, etc. However, the emotional preparation for camp is more subtle. After the decision is made to attend camp, parents have the opportunity to help their children succeed. A positive mental and emotional preparation for camp is the key to an easy adjustment once campers arrive at camp.

- **How To Survive Separation When Your Child Goes To Camp** - Since you are sending your child to camp you must believe that your child is ready for a new and challenging experience. Are you ready? You must be willing to work through the feelings of sadness, difficulty of being away from your child, and uncertainty when you are not in control of your child's life. Are you ready to help prepare your child for an exciting period of adventure, to make new friends, and life away from home? Are you ready to release your hold, to demonstrate a show of confidence both in your child and yourself, to allow this separation to happen? Are you ready to deal with possible expressions of homesickness?

### **Helpful Hints:**

- Communicate with your child in a positive, light style.
  - Have a card or letter waiting at the Camp before your child arrives. (Yes, this means mailing a letter prior to the opening day of camp!)
  - Don't let your child know how lonely you are, instead focus on what a great time they are having.
  - Brief notes during the summer saying hello are fine.
  - Don't send food. The camp will feed your child well. Expressing love through food is not healthy. And food in the bunks leads to insects in the bunks.
  - Packages of stationery, stickers, comic books - things that can be shared in the cabin - are much appreciated.
- **How To Help Your Child Have A Great Time At Camp** - Summer camp is more than a vacation for children. At camp, kids learn to appreciate the outdoors, experience the companionship of other children and young adults working as counselors, and learn skills that enhance self-reliance, cooperation with others and a sense of life larger than one's self. Hopefully, the acquisition and refinement of such skills will contribute in positive and significant ways to your child's adjustment and will carry over into their adult years.

Camp makes it easy for kids to have fun, relax and experience the spontaneous joys of childhood. A summer at camp is often perceived by children, parents, community leaders, clergy and social service agencies as a respite from the strains of everyday family life and the pressures and tensions of school. As a parent, there are a few things to consider to increase the opportunity for a rewarding camp experience for your child.

- **When Preparing For Camp**
  - *Consider camp as a learning experience.* This is an opportunity for your child to explore a world bigger than their home community and a chance for you and your child to practice "letting go." Letting go allows children to develop autonomy, a stronger sense of self, make new friends, develop new social skills, learn about teamwork, be creative and more. This time also allows parents an opportunity to take care of themselves so that they will feel refreshed when their child returns home.

- *Prepare for camp together.* Decisions about camp - like what to pack - should be a joint venture, keeping in mind your child's maturity. If your child feels a part of the decision-making process, their chances of having a positive experience will improve.
- *Don't buy a whole new wardrobe.* Camp is more rugged than life at home. A child doesn't need new clothes at camp, and having well-worn clothes and familiar possessions will help ease the transition. This is especially important for first-time campers. Clothes (and campers!) have a tendency to get dirty at camp – campers shouldn't be worrying about ruining a new pair of shorts or a new shirt during an activity. They should be able to concentrate on having a good time!
- *Listen to and talk about concerns.* As the first day of camp nears, some children experience uneasiness about going away. Encourage your child to talk about these feelings rather than acting on what you think their feelings may be. Empathize and imagine what worries are going through your child's mind. Some of your children's questions might include: "Will I miss my family, my dog, my bed, or my things?" "Will the other kids like me?" "Will my counselors be nice?" "Will I be taken care of?" "Will I have fun?" Your child may have other concerns as well.
- *Offer encouragement.* Recognize your child's concerns and calm their fears with encouraging words. Communicate confidence in your child's ability to handle being away from home. Your child's worries should not be dismissed or disregarded, but they also shouldn't be compounded or increased by additional parental concern and discussion.
- A parent might respond to the first question above with, "It's only natural to miss home a little at the beginning of a camp session, but you will get over it and have a wonderful time. We will be excited to hear all about camp and the many friends you made there when you are back home after camp." Or, "We've heard wonderful things about the counselors at the camp and are sure they will be very friendly and help with any problem. That's why we have picked this particular camp."
- *Avoid discouragement.* Be careful not to sow the seeds of failure when no concern is being expressed by a child. Statements like, "You'll probably miss us a lot and cry at night when you are at camp," will not prepare a child for success, but rather create a fear.
- *Have realistic expectations.* Camp, like the rest of life, has up times and down times. Most, but not all, moments will be filled with wonder and excitement. Encourage within your child - and maintain within yourself – a reasonable and realistic view of camp. Discuss both the ups and downs your child may experience. Opportunities for problem solving, negotiating, developing greater self-awareness and increased sensitivity to the needs of others can help your child cope with successes and failures in everyday life. Resist sending your child off to camp feeling pressured to succeed. The main purpose of camp is to have fun.
- *Communicate any of your concerns to the Camp Director or Camper Care Team.* It may be helpful to send communications in letter form so that they can be put into your child's folder to be seen by their Counselors and Unit Head before the session begins. It is good to call the Camp Director on the phone as well. Talking to the Camp Director may ease some of the parents' worries and develop the sense of partnership mentioned above. If your child expresses worries, it may help to have them talk to the Camp Director as well.
- **When Your Child Is At Camp**
  - *Communicate in writing.* Summer camp offers kids and parents the chance to develop a rarely practiced skill – letter writing. Write as often as you want. Keep in mind that this is your child's connection to home and family.

- *Your letters should be upbeat.* It's fine to write that you miss your child, but don't include things like "the house is so quiet without you." Ask specific questions in your letters about your child's activities, bunk life, friends, etc. This will help them organize their letters home.
- *Packages are appreciated every now and then, but don't send food.* Receiving food packages is contrary to camp policy. If your child asks you to sneak food packages, don't. Breaking a camp rule might interfere with your child's sense of right and wrong. Instead, send postcards, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, comics, game books, puzzles and other items that can be shared with friends. Tell your child: "You have three great meals each day and snacks. I'll send you some comic books. Hope you enjoy them. Why don't you share them with your bunkmates?". Please do not send a constant stream of "care packages" filled with "trinkets".
- *Don't make major changes at home.* This is not the time to reconfigure your marital relationship, move to a new neighborhood, sanitize or gut and redecorate your child's room or get rid of his fossilized frog collection. When most kids return from camp, they like to find things exactly as they left them.
- *Help your child cope at camp.* Most kids need a few days to adjust to life at camp and being away from home. During this time, kids may miss their parents, pets, friends and familiar surroundings. Most kids cope with these concerns and – with the help of camp staff – build support systems. If your child's letters contain pleas for you to bring him or her home, resist the temptation to rush to camp or jump to conclusions. Avoid making deals, such as "Give camp one more week. If you still want to leave, we'll bring you home." Support your child's efforts to work out problems with the help of the Director and the camp's staff. We are available by phone all summer long.
- *Communicate your love and confidence in your child's ability to work through problems.* Remind them, if necessary, that they made a commitment for the summer. Overcoming a longing for home, dealing with upsets in the cabin and learning to care for oneself are important challenges to be faced at camp. If you sense legitimacy in your child's complaints, talk candidly with the Camp Director or Inclusion Coordinator. Allow the Director and the Staff an opportunity to apply their expertise in helping your child adapt to the routines of camp life. Follow up with another call a few days later. Most adjustment difficulties can be worked through.
- **When Your Child Comes Home** - After a summer of fun, adventure and freedom, fitting back into the family and assuming responsibilities may be a challenge for some kids. Give your child time and space for this re-entry process. Support the positive changes you observe. Reintroduce "house rules" with patience and awareness that your child has done some maturing over the summer.