

If Your Kids Are Going to Camp, Don't Do This

By Lynne Burke

I started sending kids off to camp 16 years ago when the eldest of my three children was 4 years old. I've had kids at Y-camp, horse camp, soccer camp, French camp, wilderness camp and plain old two-weeks-away-from-home-bathe-in-the-lake-sleep-in-a-log-cabin camp.

I like to think that I know how to do everything right when it comes to sending a child to camp. I say this without arrogance or conceit; I speak from the humble position of a parent who has probably made every mistake there is to make. Think I'm being too hard on myself? Ask my kids, they'll level with you. Then listen to me and learn what not to do.

1. **Don't ignore your child.** Try to remember that you are not the one going to camp, your child is. It is your child's interests and inclinations, likes and dislikes that need to be taken into consideration. So what if you think two weeks of mucking out smelly stalls is a poor ex-

cuse for a summer holiday, it may be nirvana for your child. Talk to your kids, whether they're 4 or 14, and get some ideas about what they would like to do.

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2. **Don't squeeze as much into your kids' schedules as you can.** Stress has become so much a part of our everyday lives that sometimes we forget how to live without it. Summer is a time to relax. It's hard to do that if the family vacation ends and summer camp begins (or vice versa) less than 24 hours apart. It

takes time to do laundry, figure out what to pack, and just savor one experience before embarking on another. A week between adventures is recommended.

3. **Don't wait until the last minute.** Whether your son's heart is set on a particular camp session because he's trying to hook up with a friend or your daughter wants to go to a camp with a well-known, popular program, the advice is the same: register early. Sure, the brochure says the registration deadline is May 1; what it may not say is that the roster is usually full much earlier. Don't wait. Do it now!

4. **Don't plan on filling out the medical form later.** You know those camp medical forms that they send you in April that have to be turned in before your child can get on the bus to camp in July? They are the most easily forgotten pieces of paper you will ever receive. If your child has had a recent physical, send the camp form to your physician with a

stamped envelope (addressed to camp) as soon as you get the form. If you have to schedule an exam, bring a stamped, addressed envelope to your child's appointment. Mail the form on your way home.

5. **Don't make promises.** Appliances come with guarantees, life does not. Not knowing how everything is going to turn out ahead of time is what makes life exciting. Don't set expectations for your children; let them discover what camp is all about on their own. If your child is especially apprehensive about being away from home, start out slowly. Try a day camp; many offer a one-night overnight stay. When they're ready for more, an overnight camp not too far from home may be the next choice. Reserve the option of a month backpacking north of the Arctic Circle for when they're really ready for the challenge.

6. **Don't forget the camp rules.** A big part of going to camp is finding out where you fit in. This is something that every kid needs to do. Sometimes they figure it out in the first 10 minutes, sometimes it's on the bus ride home. Feeling isolated is one of summer camp's biggest challenges. That is why it is of the utmost importance that you as a parent don't do anything that would set your child apart. In other words: follow the rules. If you're not supposed to visit

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or call or send food, don't. Your kid doesn't need you getting them in trouble. Most kids do a pretty good job of that on their own.

7. **Don't forget to write.** Yeah, yeah, I know your kids told you that they've sworn off reading for the summer. This does not, I repeat, does not, include letters from home. It is embarrassing to be the only one in your cabin whose name is never called for mail delivery. Even if nothing newsworthy has happened, write. And if your kid is only going to be gone a week you better send a letter off the day they leave or even before.

8. **Don't think a care package is optional.** This is akin to treason in the camp arena. What do you mean you don't know what to send? Try a magazine, book of cartoons, Frisbee, joke book or photos of a favorite pet. If your kid will be gone a while I've found that a cheap beach towel is much appreciated for its lack of sand, dirt and mildew. If food is allowed, send something easily shared like individually wrapped hard candies, and send enough to share.

9. **Don't buy new clothes.** First of all, your kids are going to lose lots of stuff. Secondly, post-camp clothing is dirty,

rank and often unrecognizable. I once had a child return from camp having only worn one set of clothing for an entire two-week stay. She had never even unpacked! It goes without saying that camp is too dangerous a place for a special, favorite, irreplaceable piece of clothing. Don't risk it. I suggest a quick trip to a used clothing store or a garage sale tour for clothes that no one will miss if they are lost, stolen or condemned as toxic waste.

10. **Don't panic when things go wrong.** Don't think that if you make a mistake you'll ruin your children's summer—or their life. Mistakes happen. All the time. Your kids will live through it. I don't mean to imply that you should brush off their concern when something goes awry. Be sympathetic, just don't overreact. Though your child may indicate that your blunder has caused irreparable psychological damage, most kids are pretty resilient: Over time they'll forgive and forget.*

[*Except for one thing. When I told my 20-year-old son that I was writing this article he said, "I still can't believe you ironed those address labels in ALL my clothes! I was the only kid with underwear listing my zip code and phone number! I'll never forget that as long as I live!" Evidently, neither will I.]

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