

Despite the gray skies and chilly temperatures, now is the time to "think summer" if you're considering sending your child to camp this year. There are many things to look for in assessing a child's readiness for overnight camp — age, maturity level and experience being away from home. But how can a parent know if a child will be ready to make the adjustment from home to camp?

For many children, a first overnight camp experience comes between the ages of 7 to 10. There are a number of signs that a child in this age group may be ready for a camp adventure. Some are quite obvious: Has the child successfully spent the night over at a friend's house or perhaps visited grandparents or relatives apart from the parents? Other signs of readiness are a bit more subtle. Is he or she an adventurous child, interested in being independent? Is he or she able to follow rules and be responsible for belongings, two traits that will be needed at a camp away from home? Many children this age will benefit from a short camp experience like a weekend scouting trip as a trial run prior to a week or longer overnight session.

If a child is older — in the 10 to 11 age group — and hasn't been away from home before, the absence from the family may be a bit more difficult. "If a child this age doesn't want to go [off to camp],

## Ready for Overnight Camp?

By Katherine Kopp

I would push this child a little," says veteran camp director Sally Worth of Camp Minnehaha, a camp for boys ages 7 to 16 in West Virginia. Worth believes that children often worry about peer acceptance, but will adjust very well to camp with encouragement from parents and camp personnel. "Tell your child it's okay to be a little homesick," recommends Worth. "Camp can still be fun."

In Worth's 40-plus years of experience, she has seen that children who wait too long to go off to camp have a much more difficult time adjusting. "Children who are 13 to 15 and going to camp for the first time really suffer if they are homesick," she says. Joanne Wilkenfeld of Summer Solutions, an information and advisory service for summer residential programs, concurs. "The 13- to 14-year-old may feel as homesick as the 7-year-old who wants his teddy bear, but it's not as socially acceptable to express those

feelings," says Wilkenfeld.

There are a number of ways to involve a child in preparing for camp, possibly preventing or lessening homesickness for the novice camper. Many camp professionals suggest letting young prospective campers participate in the camp selection process. Though parents may need to do some pre-screening (for example, eliminating programs outside of the range of the family budget), children should be given "some say in where they will go in order to have a more positive experience," says Wilkenfeld. "If possible, let the child see a video or slide show on the camp. There may be some activity — a campfire or craft activity — pictured that might seem small to parents but may be very important to the child," Wilkenfeld says.

There are also many kinds of camps to choose from today: sports camps, wilderness camps, sailing camps, computer

camps and general camps with a wide range of activities. For older children (usually 15 and up), even more options exist. Some examples include university-based programs like writing camps and community service residential programs in needy areas which give older teens an opportunity to assist others. Selecting a camp with an orientation which meshes well with a child's needs is more likely to produce a positive camp experience.

Once you and your child have narrowed down your options, find out all you can to help your child have a smooth transition. If at all possible, visit the camp you're considering. Many camps have year-round resident directors and can arrange a tour. If it's not possible to see the camp, attend a screening of the camp's video or slide show. Ask for references of campers in your community and talk to parents and kids. Many camps have alumnae families who serve as local representatives for the camp and can field basic questions.

If this looks like the summer your child may head for the hills or the coast to camp, do your homework together and help each other prepare for that first exciting and a little bit scary adventure away from home.

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