

Early Summer Letter to Parents: Camp - Fun, Friendship and Taking Time to Grow

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Summer camp can be a wonderful experience for children, full of fun and lasting friendships. Though these reasons alone are enough to make Camp the special place it is, there is more.

Part of what is so powerful and enduring about camp is the “growing up” children do while they are here. Some campers need more time than others to get used to the routines, to adjust to living with others and to deal with the conflicts, challenges and choices that inevitably come with group living. What a great opportunity for children to learn to manage their emotions, to tolerate individual differences and to discover that they can, without constant help from their parents, resolve many issues on their own.

What parent doesn't want their child to be more self-reliant and develop even stronger coping skills? Learning by experience, however, takes time and patience. Children are always a “work in process” —a work that evolves day by day. It requires the ability to keep ones perspective, knowing that, like all of us, children have days that are better than others. The job of growing up takes coaching, encouragement and support —something campers receive from a whole variety of caring adults, including their counselors, group leaders, division leaders and others.

Sometimes parents hear about the distress their children may be experiencing at camp during an adjustment period, like feeling homesick, trying to fit in or be accepted, make new friends or get acclimated to the routines. This can be understandably stressful for you as a parent, since you obviously want the best for your child and you can't be “right there” to help out. It can be frustrating for parents to hear an anguished child on a phone call and be too far away to get the whole story or relieve the urgency.

If you should experience such a moment this summer, it helps to remember two important things about children and their adjustment to camp. First, children behave very differently depending on where they are and what group they are with. For example, they certainly don't behave the same way with their friends on the playground at school as they do when they are at a formal family gathering. Understanding this, don't be too surprised if your child exhibits behavior at camp you have never seen in them before, much of which is positive, but some of which may be problematic or challenging.

Secondly, remember that many children save their “worst” for their parents. Sharing distress with Mom or Dad is a quick way to re-establish closeness in just a few short moments. This is not to say that children deliberately “invent” situations. It is more likely that they tell their story in such a way as to elicit your empathy and therefore create an instantaneous feeling of intimacy. In short, it makes them feel loved by you. Many times I myself have witnessed a tearful camper on a call to a parent, full of desperate pleas to come home, only to see that same child ten minutes later having the time of his or her life with their friends at the waterfront or

some similar activity. So, what to do? This is where you as a parent can make a powerful and enormously useful contribution.

First and foremost, let your child know that you love them and that you are confident in their ability to cope. (They may swear they can't, but stick to your guns. One of the best ways to love your child is to instill in them a confidence they will use the rest of their lives!) Second, remind yourself that camp is a process and that the staff needs time to work with your child. Don't expect results overnight. Growing takes time. We don't get tomatoes tomorrow from seeds we plant today. Children are no different.

Third, think of suggestions that might be helpful to our staff in working with your child. Even though children may behave very differently at camp from anywhere else, you know them best. If you have an idea you think might help, share it with the appropriate person here at camp. After all, the results for your child will be better if we work together as partners. Fourth, encourage your child to share with their counselor (or Group Leader or whatever adult staff member they trust most) what they seem to be saving for you. Our staff can help your child much better if your child talks with us directly. Avoid the "triangle" that may be occurring where you, the parent, are one point; we the camp are a second point; and your child is the third point. Direct communication makes for better "tomatoes!"

All of this assumes, however, that you trust us to do what we have been practicing *for years* to do well –take the best possible care of your child while helping them grow. You have taken your time to carefully choose our camp and have familiarized yourself with who we are, so you must have developed a trust with us to take good care of your child. We take that trust seriously. Help us make our partnership match that trust.

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