

The Other Duffel Bag - Talking with Your Child about their First Time at Camp

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Sending your child away to camp for the first time is a major milestone for most families, one that is often marked by excitement, anticipation and perhaps even some anxiety. Though camp is certainly about making friends and having fun, it is also about being on your own and being a part of a community. One of the most important things you as a parent can do to help prepare your child for both these aspects of camp is to talk with your child about it before they go. In fact, it may be better to have *several occasional, shorter talks* rather than one long conversation as children often absorb more when there is less to think about at one time. Children usually do better with this sort of conversation if it is part of a more general discussion, either at the dinner table or, for example, while riding in the car doing errands.

The following are some sample topics for discussion that will help prepare your child emotionally for their big adventure at camp:

Friends. Camp is not anything if it is not about making new friends. If you are shy about meeting new kids, then learn to get to know others by being a good listener. Ask questions. Share what you have. Join in. Remember also that not everyone in your cabin, bunk or group has to be your friend, and you don't have to be everyone else's friend. *As long as you treat others with respect* and they do the same with you, then having one or two friends at camp is fine. Of course, if you have more, that's great!

Respect. No matter how you feel about anyone else—your counselors; other kids in your group—I expect you to treat people with respect. If you are angry, upset or disagree, there is a respectful way to express it!

Activities. There are many exciting things to do at camp, many of which you may never have tried before. (If your child is tending to be a bit homesick or worried about being homesick, remind them what it was they were excited about doing at camp when they first thought about going there!) You may not like all the activities or you may be better at some than others. That's normal. I, however, *expect you to try*. The more you put into camp, the more you will get out of it!

Cooperating. You, like every other camper there, will be part of a cabin, bunk or group. As your parent I expect you to cooperate with others and help out. That's part of what makes camp so special—kids helping each other out. Most kids will help you if you are friendly and help them.

Give yourself time. One thing about camp is that almost everything is new—the kids; the activities; the routines; the bed you sleep in; the bathrooms; the food and more. It takes a few days to get adjusted, so be patient with yourself. Most of the time you will

be having so much fun you won't mind all the changes, but if you do, remember that you will get so used to things that by the time you come home you will miss them all!

Getting help. Everyone has good days and bad days. If you are having a problem, your counselor is there to help you! *You don't have to wait to tell us if you are upset about something.* After all, if your counselor doesn't know what might be troubling you, they can't help you. Be honest and ask for what you need. If your counselor doesn't seem to be concerned or doesn't help you, then you can go to (the Unit Director, Head Counselor, etc. *Parents should know who this "back-up person" is and how their child will recognize them if they need to.*)

Helping out. Camp is about fun, but it also requires that you help out. Clean-up is *part of camp.* *You do it every day!* As your parent I expect you to cooperate!

Being positive. A great thing to remind your first time camper about is what his or her strong points are. I would focus not just on what they do well, but their positive qualities as well, such as what makes them a good friend or the type of person other kids would want to know. Helping children identify their strengths can help them when they are having a set back—one of those inevitable growing pains all children have from time to time.

Gratitude. A lot of people have worked hard to make sure you have a good time at camp. Your counselors, the people in the dining hall, the maintenance staff, the health staff—they all work hard so you can have fun. Be grateful for what others do for you.

Talking with your child about these kinds of issues is a great way to support them as they get ready take this important step on the road to being more resilient and self-reliant. For you as a parent it can give you more peace of mind as you allow your child to participate safely in a broader world—a world introduced to them in part by camp!

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