



Gear Up for Summer – Preparing Your Child for Summer Camp

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I went to summer sleep-away camp in New Hampshire for two months every year from the age of 8 until I became a C.I.T. (counselor in training) and then a camp counselor. When I tell my friends this, many can't hide the look of abject horror on their faces. Some respond without thinking, "Wow! Your parents must have hated you!" On the contrary, my sister and I loved summer camp. We begged to go back each year and cried our eyes out every summer in August when it ended and we had to go back to school.

Summer camp was one of those life-changing experiences for me that I can't describe adequately. I learned to be independent at summer camp, to make new friends from outside of the small town in Massachusetts where I grew up, and to live closely with others, even those I may not have liked that much. Camp gave me the opportunity to safely explore myself in relation to my peers, to learn the value of teamwork, and to respect the needs of others.

Many of you may have children who will attend camp this year, either day camp or sleep-away camp, for the very first time. You want to get your child started off right so that they will have the best camp experience possible.

Tips for Parents:

- 1. Choose the camp together.** Engage your child in the decision-making process. Browse brochures, search the Internet, and look at the pros and cons of different camps together before deciding which camp is the best fit for your child.
- 2. Talk about feelings but communicate confidence.** Your child may be excited and anxious about starting camp. Listen to his/her feelings and answer any questions he/she might have. But, always communicate confidence that he/she will enjoy camp.
- 3. Set realistic expectations for camp.** Like any experience, camp will have its highs and lows. Predict ahead of time with your child that there will be times when he/she may be bored or homesick. Reassure them that those feelings are normal and will pass.
- 4. Keep in touch with your child.** Many camps don't allow cell phones (so you won't want to send your camper with one), but they gladly accept mail. When my son was at sleep-away camp, I tried to send a letter several times a week, to reassure him that I was

thinking of him. I made sure that the letters were pretty boring so that he wouldn't feel like he was missing anything at home.

5. Pay attention to the camp's supply list. This list allows you to plan ahead. I remember my mother laying out clothes and camp items weeks in advance. She said that she felt less stressed when she planned ahead.

6. Anything you don't want your child to lose, don't pack! Even if you label everything, items will be lost. Don't let your child talk you into sending sentimental or valuable items. It will be very upsetting to the child (and you) if things disappear.

Summer camp offers your child a terrific opportunity to practice independence, learn self-care skills, and acquire interpersonal skills. It's also a great chance for you to practice your own skills of "letting go."