

RAISING KIDS

The First Stage of Letting Go: Sleepaway Camp

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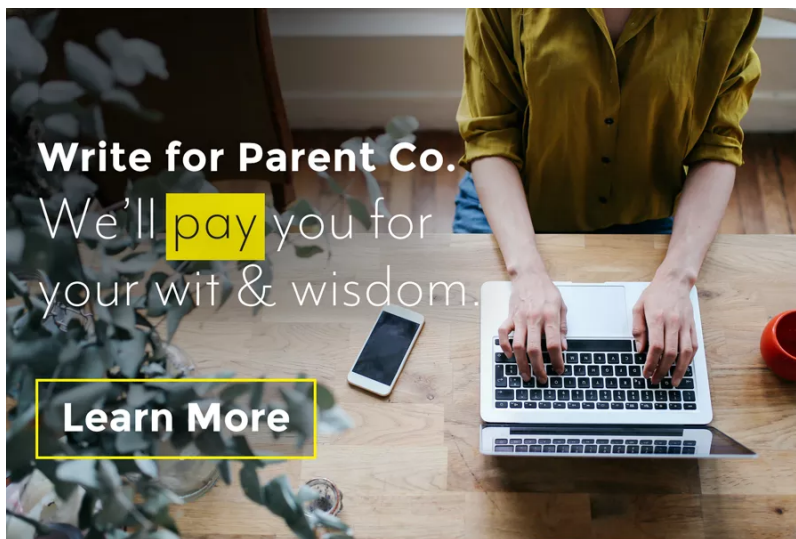


It's been five long days since I put my son on the bus heading to overnight camp. I did not react right away, but after a day of him not being in the house, I started to crack. Parenthood is never easy, but this was a new, almost bizarre, experience for me. For the last nine years, I was fully responsible for my son's every move and knew where he was and what he was doing at all times. Now I had to face the challenge of letting him go. By the giant smiles on his face in the pictures, it's clear that this is more of an issue for me than for him.

During the second night my son was away, I had an awful nightmare that he got hurt and I was not there to help him. I woke up with such fear and guilt about my decision to send him away. What was I thinking? No phone calls. No immediate feedback. No way of knowing what was going on. Was I being an irresponsible parent? What if something happens and I'm not there to comfort him? What if he needs me? Will he ever forgive me?

When the camp started posting pictures, I was so excited to see what my little boy has been up to. Let me tell you – he's having the best time of his life! I saw him smiling at a campfire, bonding with his new bunk mates, heading down the lake in a raft, playing basketball, and partying at the camp welcome dance.

Oddly enough, the tears started pouring down my cheeks when I saw such happy photos of my son. I should be relieved that he's adjusting well and having a blast, but something inside me didn't feel quite right. I wasn't the one responsible for providing those amazing moments for him. I wasn't there sharing those fun experiences with him. He was out in the great big world having fun without me, and this was upsetting.



It all sounds pretty ridiculous, right? Although not if you consider the tremendous strength of the mother-child bond. I just didn't predict that I'd be the one to struggle when that bond went on hiatus for four weeks. The good news is that I raised an independent son who's not afraid to go off on his own, but the bad news is that this is a bigger adjustment for me than I could ever imagine.

However, as many friends and experts have noted, giving our children the gift of overnight camp is one of the best things we can do for them. As painful as it is to set our kids free and lose control over them, in the long run they'll only grow from the time spent away. Our main job as parents is to give our children the tools they need to go out into the world and discover who they are and what they want to become. A child can only truly grow if given freedom and the chance to gain confidence by exploring new ideas and activities. This is what overnight camp is giving my son. I know it deep within in my heart, but my heart still aches to be able to talk to him about his day and hug him every night.

Let's face it. Many of us are helicopter parents. It's a scary world out there – from guns to drugs to illness to bullying – so we want to keep a constant eye on our kids, but we're not doing them any favors in the long run by hovering over them. According to Michael Thompson, a clinical psychologist and author of "Homesick and Happy, How Time Away from Parents Can Help a Child Grow," true independence is something parents cannot give their children; they must live it on their own. In fact, we can actually hinder our children's development if we are constantly making all of their decisions for them. Overnight camp provides a period of time during the year for our children to discover life without us breathing down their necks.

As difficult as it's been to let my son go, I realize all the amazing life-long skills that he is developing while at camp.

Confidence

I know that my son will be more confident and have more self-esteem because of this time away. Camps provide many unique opportunities for children learn, contribute, and feel like they belong. They learn from trying new activities and making new friends, are part of sports teams and their bunk, and contribute by helping during meals and chores.

Camp also provides ways for children to feel a sense of accomplishment. When they succeed, they're empowered and have more confidence when faced with the next challenge. They also learn from their mistakes and failures, which only makes them more resilient in the future. Some camp experiences even allow them to conquer their fears, whether it be learning to swim in a lake or climbing a ropes course.

Independence

Camp helps children become more independent. They learn how to make their own decisions without parents and teachers always telling them what to do. They're expected to manage daily chores, show up on time to activities, and keep their belongings neat and clean.

Broader perspective

At camp, children begin to see the world differently. They're away from their comfort zone and exposed to new people and experiences that give them a broader perspective. They realize that they're part of something bigger than themselves and their immediate family. Finally, they meet and learn from people of different backgrounds, from different locations, and with various interests.

Community connection

Children benefit from being part of the special community found at overnight camp. It gives them a sense of belonging, which will ultimately improve their ability to cooperate, participate, and be caring citizens. Campers also gain new social skills from being in a group setting. They must share a room with others, manage chores, resolve conflicts, communicate effectively, and be kind and accommodating to their fellow campers. Being part of a close-knit community can be challenging at times, but children who learn how to adapt and get along with others will benefit for a lifetime.

Self-reflection

The camp environment provides a chance for kids to slow down and listen to their own thoughts. They're forced to unplug from their electronics (I wonder if my son is having withdrawal symptoms from not playing video games) and soak in the beautiful nature around them. This allows them to be more mindful of their surroundings and emotions. They can focus on the simple things in life like going on a hike, watching a sunset, singing around the campfire, and talking in-depth to their friends.

Creativity

Camp provides a time for unstructured free play. Campers are encouraged to use their creativity to solve problems and have fun. They also learn how to keep busy with activities that have been used for centuries, such as swimming and boating in a lake, woodworking, and theater performances. This carefree living gives them a chance to relax without the pressures of their hectic, overly-scheduled lives back home.

Frankly, I wish I'd had the opportunity to attend overnight camp as a kid. I know that it would have helped me be a better person and reduce some of the challenges I've faced throughout my life. If I had to share a room with a dozen other girls, I probably would travel better, adjust to new surroundings more easily, and get along more successfully with my peers during high school, college, and throughout adulthood. As sad as I am right now that I am missing an important piece of my family for a few weeks, I know that I'm giving my son an opportunity of a lifetime to be the best, most successful person he can be.

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