

Your Child's First Sleep-Away

By Russell Hyken | Posted: Thursday, March 1, 2012 4:08 pm

Last summer, my 8-year-old went to sleep-away camp. We plunked down the deposit and shortly thereafter, our concerns started to spiral. *Is he too young? Will he be homesick? What if he doesn't like his cabin mates?* and *Will he eat the food?* were some of the ridiculous questions that weaved in and out of our everyday conversations.

Kids are often ready to attend overnight camp long before their parents are comfortable sending them. What makes this such a difficult decision is that there is no definitive rule about the appropriate age for this first adventure. Many campers begin overnights as 9- or 10-year-olds, and most camp professionals agree that readiness is more about attitude than chronological age.

How long a child should leave the creature comforts of their room to rough it in a bunk house should be carefully considered. Many parents believe that a week is good length of time to trial the camp experience. Seven days, however, may not be long enough for a camper to relax, conquer homesickness and develop solid relationships with newfound friends. Consider two weeks or more to fully maximize the life-changing experience camp can provide.

Once you decide to send your little one to the great outdoors, everyone will have moments of doubt. Keep your feelings in check and focus on your camper. Avoid rambling on about how much you will miss your baby and instead, focus on the exciting adventure ahead. Don't create further separation anxiety by making your son or daughter feel guilty about their upcoming summer of fun.

It also is important to acknowledge that everyone experiences homesickness. Furthermore, in my own selfish way, I actually want my son to really miss and appreciate his wonderful parents, but more importantly, I want him to learn how to master his emotions. Good parenting requires recognizing potential life obstacles and then assisting your kids in climbing over those bumps.

Having upfront conversations about homesickness builds self-confidence. Ask your child what camp worries he has and discuss how to overcome them. Talk to a counselor, spend time with his camp 'big brother' or just go do something fun. Also participate in some multi-generational commiseration and share your own homesick experiences. Your child will understand the universality to this emotional rite of passage, and you get to reminisce about some of your favorite camp memories. Lastly, reach out to your camp director if you feel that additional support might be needed.

OK, bags are packed and the big day is here! Your child is nervous and excited... and so are you. Don't blow the departure with excessive tears and an overly emotional goodbye. Keep it short. Embrace your camper with a final hug and tell him to write about all the fun things he will be doing. Once you are safely in the car, let the tears flow and take a moment to think about why your child is on this adventure. Camp teaches kids how to do things on their own: brush teeth, make their bed and plan their

days. Camp helps kids understand teamwork and how to make new friends. And, my favorite, camp allows kids to ‘unplug,’ slow down and appreciate the world.

We spend our children’s formative years protecting and nurturing them. Trusting this responsibility to someone else—even if only for a few days— provokes angst in any parent. Letting go is difficult but kids return from camp with a new sense of independence. In fact, our child was more responsible, kept his room clean and put his dishes in the sink—it was one of our proudest parenting weeks ever. This year, the whole house is excited for his return to Lake Plantagenet—and he is taking his little brother with him!