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Out of the Nest and Into the Woods: Your Child's First Camping Experience

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There comes a time when a child is ready to branch out and have an adventure that is truly his own. Many of us look back fondly on our first sleep-away camp experience. The stomach butterflies as we waved goodbye to our parents are probably forgotten. But the satisfied feeling of sharing popcorn by the campfire after a full day outdoors with friends will remain forever.

Or perhaps you never went to camp and you'd like to give your child the experience you missed. As yet another step in letting go, it's natural to have questions and concerns about your child's first resident camp experience.

Tom and Val Ewan are co-directors of Rawhide Ranch (www.rawhideranch.com) in Bonsall, California, just an hour out of San Diego. Tom Ewan says, "If possible, let your child be part of the decision as to which camp they will attend. Visit ahead of time so the child can see what it's all about and what it looks like."

It's normal for a child to be unsure of the unknown. Walking around the camp will demystify the idea a bit, as will talking to some of the counselors. If your child can ask questions and hear the enthusiasm of a veteran camper, chances are, he will begin to feel intrigued by the notion of camp.

Ewan feels that it's important to practice being away from home for a weekend at Grandma's house, or a friend's. This allows the child to build confidence that he is able to manage staying overnight away from family, and even enjoy the novelty of it. Ewan also suggests that giving kids a taste of what to expect by trying day camp first can make for a smoother transition to the resident camp experience.

Bob Lindsay, Director of Indian Hills Camp (www.indianhillscamp.com) in Jamul, explains, "The parents' enthusiasm and fear usually equal the child's feelings." He advises parents to work out their own fears separately from their children so they don't create that fear in their child.

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Spouses can talk to each other and also to parents whose children have been to camp. Phrases like “I hope you don’t get lonely being away a whole week,” are not helpful to the child. Phoning every night can also lead to homesickness. “In fact, if a parent calls during a child’s first camping experience, the child most often goes home,” Lindsay says.

Writing or emailing can offer kids some comfort. But Lindsay cautions, “Don’t tell your child the dog and his little brother miss him. Focus on saying the dog is fine, and that his brother hopes he’s having a good time. Keep things upbeat.” A brief written hello goes much further to boost morale than three pages of details from home.

To help campers and counselors cope with the inevitable outbreaks of homesickness, Indian Hills Camp has developed a “Homesick Procedure.” Parents are asked to give their child two days to adjust to being away from home, and after that, if the child still wants to go home, that’s probably what he needs to do.

To support campers through the crucial first two-day adjustment, Lindsay says, “Counselors focus on relationship building. They find commonalities with the kids to bridge connections and common interests. I was a homesick camper my first time, until I found out one of the counselors grew up in my grandmother’s hometown.”

Lindsay also recommends that parents send a note to the child’s counselor if they can’t speak to them personally, explaining that it’s their child’s first time at camp. Share hobbies, favorite characters or other interests, so the counselor already has a way to connect with your child, and can help lessen his urge leave camp early.

Ewan advises, “Don’t be afraid to talk about homesickness. It’s OK to be homesick.” Reassure your child that his counselors will help him through it if he talks to them about his feelings. Share that you have felt homesick, too. Help your child gain the perspective that missing home simply means that after a fun week it will be good to be back home. Homesickness often strikes at night, so encourage your child to focus on his favorite part of each day when he nestles into his sleeping bag.

Counselors also help kids who miss home by keeping them busy and kindling excitement for upcoming activities like the Wild West Show or the carnival. The days are packed with crafts, hiking, archery, gold mining, horseback riding, paintball, swimming, an obstacle course, and on the list goes. Your child may be too tuckered out at the day’s end to utter much more than a homesick sigh before falling asleep.

Often, the most meaningful part of a child’s first time away at camp is forming new friendships. Friends from camp share the adventure of a glorious, sheltered independence. The time-limited nature of the experience sometimes sparks a bond that children appreciate on a deeper level.

Campers blossom with the pride of their mutual accomplishments as part of a team. Eating meals and brushing teeth together as well as delighting in night-time giggles create a closeness that children cherish long after camp ends. Indeed, many campers remain pen pals for years.

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There is a magical quality to a child's first camping experience. In going to camp your child will have the privilege of being part of a supportive community in which he grows confident enough to try new things. Perhaps the sweetest lesson grows from the interplay between realizing how much a child loves his family and finding out how much fun he can have away from home.

Before You Pack

Find more information and good ideas at the American Camping Association's web site, www.acacamps.org. *The Summer Camp Handbook*, by Drs. Christopher A. Thurber and Jon C. Malinowski (Perspective Publishing, Inc.), is best described by its subtitle, "*Everything you need to find, choose, and get ready for overnight camp-and skip the homesickness.*"

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