

# Summer Camp Guide

- 2020 -



- Tips for first-time campers
- Expert advice on what to bring
- Setting up your child for success



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**Amy Dotson-Newton**.....PUBLISHER/AD DIRECTOR  
(302) 346-5449 amy.newton@doverpost.com  
**Ben Mace**.....NEWS EDITOR  
(302) 346-5421 ben.mace@doverpost.com  
**Craig O'Donnell**.....READER ENGAGEMENT SPECIALIST  
(302) 346-5441 craig.odonnell@doverpost.com  
**Brian Shane**.....GRAPHIC DESIGNER

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# Tips for first time campers and their parents

By **Melissa Erickson**

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**S**leep-away camp is a big deal for both campers and their parents, and it often brings feelings of excitement and anxiety. Is your child ready for it?

“One way to gauge a child’s readiness for overnight camp is if the child has had successful overnight experiences away from home, at a friend’s or relative’s,” said Tom Rosenberg, president and CEO of the American Camp Association. “Beyond those experiences, parents should involve their child in the search and preparation process. Reach out to the camp director and ask questions. If possible, tour prospective camps in person prior to choosing.”

### Missing home is normal

“Homesickness is not a sickness. It’s normal for kids to miss home. Kids can have the most wonderful time at camp and still feel homesick,” said Corey Dockswell, director of Camp Wicosuta, a traditional four-week sleep-away camp for girls in Hebron, New Hampshire.

What’s most important is to take your cues from you child, Dockswell said.

“If they’re excited about camp, talk about what fun

they’re going to have. Don’t put negative thought in their head,” she said.

### What to look forward to

“The best thing is for families to stay positive,” said Jared Shapiro, director of Camp Winadu, a boys summer camp in the Berkshire Mountains, Massachusetts. “Talk about all the friends they’re going to make, all the fun activities they’re going to do. What’s unknown is what often makes kids nervous, so discuss what they should expect.”

“Parents should discuss the info they’ve gathered in the search process,” Rosenberg said. “Discuss the answers that camp directors have given the family. Check out the camp’s website as a family and look at packing lists, maps of the camp, photos from last summer.”

### No pick-up deals

Avoid any suggestions that you will pick up your camper if he feels homesick or unhappy, all experts agreed.

“This conveys a message of doubt and pity that undermines children’s confidence and independence,” Rosenberg said. “The camp director and camp staff are your partners. If your child is homesick, feel free to call the camp and discuss ways in which you can work together to solve the problem.”

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# How to set up your child for success

By **Melissa Erickson**

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**W**hether your child is filled with excitement or feeling a bit anxious, summer camp can be an amazing, life-changing experience, especially with tips from camp experts.

While families tend to focus on which activities are available, the setting or amenities, the most important consideration should be whether the camp is a good match for a child.

“Ultimately what makes a great camp experience is the fit between the camper and the camp,” said Jake Schwartzwald, director of Everything Summer, a nationwide service that helps parents find camps for their children.

## Find a good fit

“My biggest tip for having an amazing summer camp experience happens months before camp begins: It is picking the right camp,” said Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez, Jewish camp initiative manager at the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta. “There are so many options out there and not every camp is right for every kid, even in the same family.”

“In the right environment (specific activities) don’t matter. A child will make friends, have fun and build a general feeling of confidence,” Schwartzwald said.

## Take a step back

“Summer camp is filled with growth experiences, but those can often be challenging for children,” Schwartzwald said. If a child is not picked for a role in the play he may feel rejection. If another camper sits on a child’s bed without permission it may cause a fight.

While parents often feel the urge to jump in and solve children’s problems, they should have faith that camp staff can handle tricky situations, Schwartzwald said.

“It can be hard for parents when they get a letter home describing a less-than-perfect experience, but have faith the camp can help. Allow the child to navigate these situations on their own,” he said.

## Making new friends

Friendships formed at summer camp are different than other childhood friendships.

“Becoming friends while living together is unique; it’s not a playdate or even a sleepover,” Schwartzwald said. During these hours of togetherness children are able to form a sense of community that is life changing, he said.

## A new you

“Camp is also a place where kids can reinvent themselves,” Schwartzwald said.

At home friendships often happen because kids are pushed together in school, religious groups or family circles.

“Camp is different because you’re meeting people for the first time and making friendships happen,” he said.

It’s also a chance for a child to try on a new persona. For example, someone known as an athlete can take center stage during talent night without other kids questioning why they’re doing something different, Schwartzwald said.

## Be transparent

For parents of kids who are shy, anxious or have special needs, Schwartzwald said, it’s crucial to communicate these personality traits to camp staff.

“Parents can be reluctant to share, but camps want this information in order to put the right support in place,” he said. For example, it can be as simple as situating a nervous camper on a bunk closer to the cabin counselor.

“Overnight camp is an adjustment for any child, even the most precocious,” Schwartzwald said. To prepare kids for a great experience, talk about it beforehand and meet or Skype with a counselor in advance so they know a friendly face when they arrive, he said.

## Stick with it

“No matter how homesick you are the first few days, don’t ask your parents to come get you,” Scholten-Gutierrez said. “Homesickness is completely natural and even expected, and it will get better as you settle in and the counselors and staff become your second family.”





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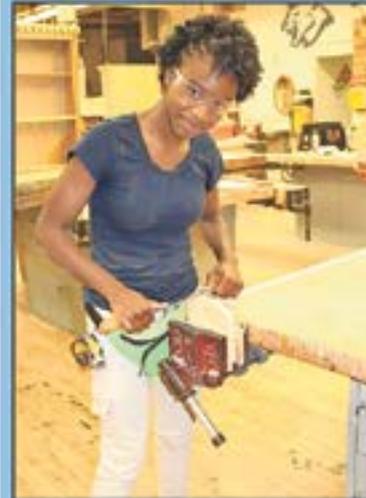
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# Expert advice on what to bring

By **Melissa Erickson**

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**M**ost camps offer packing lists and guidance on what to bring and what not to bring, but the main summer camp essentials are a kind, open mind and a willingness to make new friends and try new things.

“When kids go in ready to try new things they’re not stuck in their comfort zone, and that’s how they make new friends and connect with others,” said Louis Lasko, assistant camp director at Camp Laurelwood in Madison, Connecticut.

## Bring extra

In addition to being welcoming and receptive to new things, campers should pack extra towels or at least the suggested amount.

“If the camp recommends bringing six towels, don’t pack two and think you’ll be fine,” Lasko said. With all the swimming, sailing and showering plus rain, “you can never have enough,” Lasko said.

For an upgrade campers can buy a quick-dry towel made of microfiber that is super absorbent yet dries faster than cotton.

It’s also good advice to pack extra socks and underwear because campers often change clothes between activities, especially if that includes lake hikes and messy craft times.

## Hydration is vital

“Reusable water bottles are environmentally friendly, often durable and portable. It is quite possible that your child’s cabin will go on a hike or keep on the move throughout the day,” said Kyle Winkel, spokesperson for the American Camp Association. “If there are not an abundance of water fountains at the camp, it is important that your camper is able to stock up to continue hydrating throughout the day.”

## Get comfortable

Younger kids may bring along a cherished stuffed animal to snuggle with while older ones may like to spend down time listening to music,

SEE WHAT TO BRING, PAGE 10



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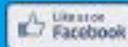
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## WHAT TO BRING

FROM PAGE 8

Lasko said.

“Relatively cheap MP3 players not connected to a phone or internet do exist,” Lasko said.

Photos of family, friends and pets can make a cabin feel more like home and are great conversation starters for new friends, Lasko said.

During quiet cabin times, board and card games give kids a chance to interact, Lasko said. Go with classics like Go Fish and Mad Libs, or try something newer such as Exploding Kittens or Code Names.

“Books are always popular with both boys and girls,” Lasko said.

### Don't forget

Since most campers will be walking outside to the bath house a decent pair of flip-flops is a must, Lasko said. A handy basket to tote along soap, shampoo and

toothpaste is also a good idea.

A flashlight and extra batteries, a stationary kit, a battery-operated clip fan, musical instrument or cheap, disposable cameras are also great additions to pack in your duffel bag.

### Leave it home

Phones, tablets and anything else that connects to the internet should be left at home, Lasko said.

“We want to make sure that kids are fully present. If kids have these devices it's too easy for them to sit and play on them all day long,” he said.

Don't pack outside food.

“Every year we have to remind families. We're not trying to be mean. It's about safety both for kids with allergies and keeping wildlife out of cabins,” Lasko said.

Don't send expensive, irreplaceable things like jewelry. No matter how careful campers are, things get lost, Lasko said.

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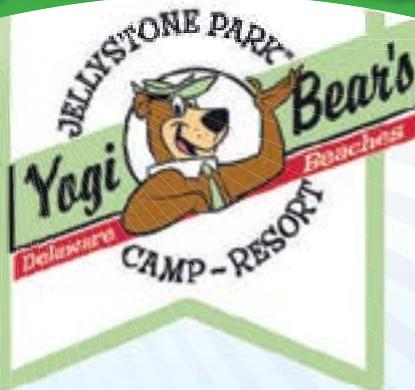
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**“Prevention of accidents and injuries is important at camp, but most parents are concerned about their child’s emotional safety. They want to be sure their child fits in, is included and adjusts well to the camp environment.”**

*- Alyson Gondek,  
Camp Woodmont*

# Safety questions you will need to ask

By **Melissa Erickson**

[More Content Now](#)

**K**eeping kids safe at summer camp involves everything from first aid kits and sunscreen to camper-to-staff ratios and packing medications.

One of parents’ first considerations should be to find out whether a camp is accredited with the American Camp Association, said Dr. Michael Ambrose, founder and CEO of CampDoc, an electronic health record system for camps.

“The American Camp Association sets the standard,” Ambrose said. To earn accreditation camps must undergo a thorough review of operations that include staff qualifications, training and emergency management. The American Camp Association collaborates with experts from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Red Cross and other youth-serving agencies to ensure that current camp practices reflect the most up-to-date, research-based standards.

Medical issues, such as if there is camp a nurse on staff and how medication is delivered, are big concerns, but parents also look at overnight summer camp as an investment in their child’s emotional, spiritual and intellectual growth, said Alyson Gondek, director of Camp Woodmont in Northwest Georgia.

“Prevention of accidents and injuries is important at camp, but most parents are concerned about their child’s emotional safety,” she said. “They want to be sure their child fits in, is included and adjusts well to the camp environment.”

## Ask the right questions

“Selecting the right program for your child is a matter of knowing your options and asking the right questions. While the internet offers a lot of search options for camp, it’s important for parents to pick up the phone and speak with the owners or directors,” Gondek said.

A conversation can reveal a greater understanding of the experience and background of the camp staff, management, camp’s philosophy and programs, she said.

## Medicine management

Medicine management is serious business at summer camp.

“Medications should be brought in their original bottle from the pharmacy and checked-in with the camp nurse or director. Medicine should not be packed and kept in the cabins with the campers, regardless if it’s over-the-counter or prescription,” Gondek said.

Everything from gummy vitamins to herbal supplements to over-the-counter allergy medicines must be documented and communicated to the camp health care team, Ambrose said.

Each camp has its own guidelines and state regulations about what it can and cannot administer while a child is in its care. If possible, medications should be sent to camp before the camper arrives so that health care providers have adequate time to review and sort medications and address any concerns.

## The right ratio

The camper-to-staff ratio is important not only so kids get the attention they deserve but also so that they stay safe, Ambrose said. The ideal camper-to-staff ratio recommended by the American Camping Association is:

- 5 and younger: 1 staffer for each 5 overnight campers; 1 staffer for each 6 day campers.
- Ages 6 to 8: 1 to 6 for overnight and 1 to 8 for day.
- Ages 9 to 14: 1 to 8 for overnight and 1 to 10 for day.
- Ages 15 to 18: 1 to 10 for overnight and 1 to 12 for day.

# How parents and campers can be prepared for allergies

By **Melissa Erickson**

More Content Now

**F**rom food allergies to insect stings, allergic reactions can spoil a summer camp experience. Parents may be concerned, but finding the right camp for a child with allergies allows the camper to enjoy the experience while trained staff make sure the right protections are in place.

Most camps are well prepared to manage both food and environmental allergies at camp, said Tracey Gaslin, executive director of the Association of Camp Nursing.

“Camps generally have protocols in place for the identification and treatment of allergies often with epinephrine and diphenhydramine,” Gaslin said.

## Do your homework

“A camp’s preparedness for food allergies depends on the staff’s diligence and policies that have been put into place to protect campers who do have food allergies,” said Lisa Gable, CEO of the nonprofit Food Allergy Research & Education. “We recommend that parents and guardians make direct contact with the camp’s administration well before camp begins, sharing details of a child’s allergy and ensuring there is documented and comprehensive

SEE ALLERGIES, PAGE 14



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# ALLERGIES

FROM PAGE 13

awareness around any and all allergies.”

All staff who will be responsible for a child and anyone who may offer food or plan events needs to be aware of a child's allergy, Gable said. This can include lifeguards, transportation drivers, cafeteria workers, camp nurses and counselors.

## Kids can help

The best plan is to educate a child about his or her condition.

“This does not happen at one point in time but is a continuous developmental effort to encourage the young individual to recognize symptoms and know how to respond in the event of an allergic response,” Gaslin said.

In addition to providing a camp with a child's complete medical record, children with allergies should have an emergency action plan, which is developed with the child's primary care doctor, allergist and parents.

“For camps, an action plan is typically an agreed upon plan for managing symptoms of allergy,” Gaslin said. “In having a mutually discussed plan, the parents feel confident that they have been heard, and the camp can share what their capabilities are

for response to events.”

Visit [foodallergy.org](http://foodallergy.org) to download FARE's Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan, as well as a list of camps that are either designed specifically for children with food allergies or that welcome campers with food allergies.

## Two kinds of reactions

Common allergic reactions present mostly in two ways: a more localized response and anaphylaxis, Gaslin said. Localized reactions include itching, swelling at the site and redness. Serious and possibly life-threatening, anaphylaxis has a generalized response including skin rashes or hives; difficulty breathing; swelling of face, lips, throat and eyes; vomiting or diarrhea; dizziness or fainting.

“If anaphylaxis occurs, immediate response is required, and it is helpful for camp staff to know if a child has had a previous anaphylaxis experience,” Gaslin said.

Campers should be instructed in the use of personal emergency medications or medical devices, such as inhalers or epinephrine autoinjectors, before arrival at camp.

## Follow these guidelines

“Every three minutes, a food allergy reaction sends someone to the emergency room in the



United States,” Gable said. Symptoms may start out mild, but they can worsen quickly.

- Never trade food with other campers.
- Do not eat anything with unknown ingredients.
- Read every food label and double-check with a counselor (if age appropriate).
- Be proactive and seek help for all allergic reactions, even suspected ones.
- Tell an adult if feeling a reaction starting, even if there are no visible signs.
- Do not go off alone if experiencing allergic symptoms.
- Know where the emergency care kit is located or which camp counselors have access to it.

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# The value of letter writing and how it helps

By Melissa Erickson

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**N**o matter how traditional or 21st century, all summer camps have one thing in common: letter writing. Letters from camp or letters from home can be a powerful form of communication and become treasured keepsakes.

Even though putting pen to paper may seem an antiquated effort that both kids and adults find challenging, the act of composing and sending a message helps kids learn real life lessons, said Dr. Christopher Thurber, a clinical psychologist, educator and author of “The Summer Camp Handbook.”

“Letter writing is asynchronous, meaning the communication is not happening in real time,” Thurber said. “It’s not a phone call or a text message. It forces you to wait. It helps kids develop patience, but it’s also an opportunity for younger people to bolster their coping skills.”

A child may feel homesick or unhappy while at camp, but that distress has a silver lining, Thurber said: “It’s a reflection of the closeness we feel.” When a person feels distressed they are motivated to change something, but if a letter writer is waiting for a reply they are motivated to cope with the situation.

“If you’re allowed to call home, that instant gratification eliminates distress from the equation but a child is also not allowed to learn how to cope with a situation,” Thurber said.

While waiting for a parent’s reply campers have the experience of turning to others, such as a camp counselor or cabinmate for support, which is a positive coping skill.

Another benefit of letter writing is that it allows people to gain an understanding of what they’re feeling.

“There’s no delete key. Even little kids are more thoughtful writing a handwritten letter,” Thurber said. “When we reflect we understand. When we understand we cope better. When we cope better we do better.”

Letter writing is a skill, and parents may wonder how they will get a letter from a child more used to texting than talking.

To start, put together a basic stationary kit using a zip-top plastic bag. Include plenty of paper, pens or pencils, and stamped and addressed envelopes, Thurber said. Use the peel-and-stick kind because kids may dislike the taste of envelope glue.



“Before camp give them some practice. You can start with an index card. Over breakfast, write a note they can respond to. It can be short, one line. Then, have them flip the card over and write a note back,” Thurber said.

For the most part it doesn’t really matter what’s in the letter, but it’s the act of keeping in touch.

“Be encouraging. Tell them it’s going to be a fun way to communicate,” Thurber said.

Ask the camp how long it typically takes mail to be sorted and delivered so a child knows what to expect, Thurber said. Explain how letters cross in the mail.

Ask kids to share the news of camp and what they’re doing.

“The point is to keep each other posted about what’s going on. The best letters are newsy updates,” Thurber said.

Avoid guilt trips or sad stories, such writing that the dog misses the camper.

“Don’t give kids a reason to miss you more,” Thurber said.

Include items your child will enjoy, such as clippings or printouts from the newspaper or magazines.

If sending a care package, avoid food (which many camps won’t accept) and send a book that can be donated to the camp’s library, a board game or something cabinmates can do together.

If a camp offers an email service, skip it.

“Letter writing is a true away-from-home experience. Email is not as good as a handwritten letter where you can see their penmanship. Summer camp nurtures a child’s independence, but that doesn’t mean you’re severing the connection from home,” Thurber said.

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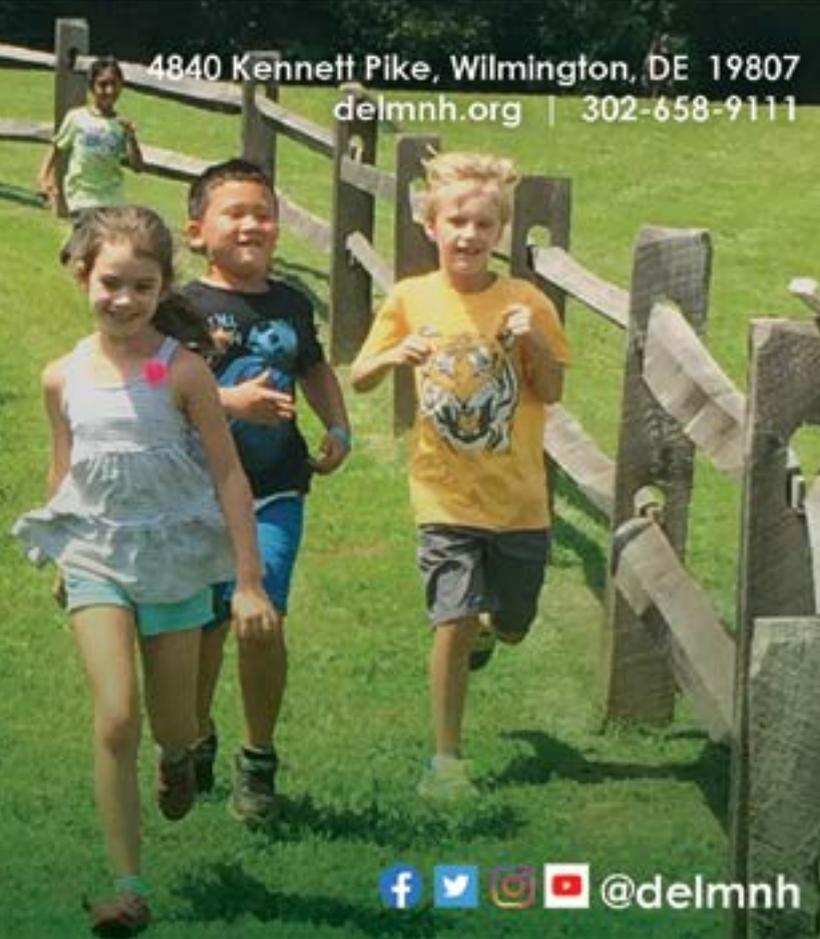
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# Friends for life: Camp can create strong bonds

By **Melissa Erickson**

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Elizabeth Much's summer camp days are long behind her, but the friendships she made 30 years ago are still going strong. What is it about summer camp friendships? "Summer camp is a life-changing experience," said Much, chief executive officer of East 2 West Collective, a public relations agency with offices in Los Angeles and New York City. "Living in close proximity with other girls your age in a small cabin is intense. It's like a female lifeboat. It's all about friendship and camaraderie."

From ages 9 to 14 Much spent weeks of each summer at Eagle River, Wisconsin's Chippewa Ranch Camp, a classic girls summer camp set under a canopy of red and white pine trees alongside a clear, sandy-bottomed lake.

"The experience defined my life," Much said.

Summer camp is a transitive experience where children are freed from parental supervision yet safely contained and watched over by camp counselors whose aim is to create meaningful, memorable moments.

"Summer camp creates a special bond between friends. It's a special place where kids can develop close friendships as they experience new things together," said Louis Lasko, assistant camp director of Camp Laurelwood in Madison, Connecticut.

For many kids the new experiences are not just horseback riding or water skiing.

"At camp you really get down and

dirty. Your parents are not there to do things for you. You have to work together to do linens, pitch the tent, clean the cabin, start a fire," Much said.

Living in such close quarters brings kids together and makes them more well-rounded and self-sufficient, Much said.

"I think sharing memories for eight weeks -- meals, activities, being homesick, laughing, etc. -- allows you to grow with friends," said Samantha Wenig, vice president of London Misher Public Relations in New York City and alumna of Camp Robindel in Center Harbor, New Hampshire. "We were in bunks with 20-plus girls so it was also really nice to learn about everyone's family, traditions and stories. I was also lucky that a lot of my best camp friends live close to me during the school year so we were able to see each other prior to the next summer."

Even if summer camp friends don't live near each other they often stay in touch and share special parts of each other's lives, such as standing up in each other's weddings, Lasko said.

In summer 2017, Much attended a Chippewa Ranch Camp reunion staying with three other alums in a cabin.

"It was like time had stood still. We felt like teen girls again. That's the intensity of the feeling," she said.

Reigniting friendships, they spoke of marriages, divorces and illnesses. "It was very powerful," Much said.

They spent the days enjoying the trees and nature, riding horses, waterskiing and canoeing, then winding down around the campfire at night.

"Everybody remembered every word



of the campfire songs we sang," Much said.

As an adult many of Wenig's camp friends are still a part of her daily life.

"Good friends are forever and will love you no matter what. ... Pretty amazing to have these special bonds that were all made within eight weeks at camp," Wenig said.

People who have made long-lasting camp friendships are often inspired to have their own children attend the same camp so their kids can also be friends, Lasko said.

Wenig's mother, Jody Berger Wenig, also went to Camp Robindel. "I loved seeing her name written in the bunks," Wenig said.

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# Advice for dealing with pre-camp jitters

By **Melissa Erickson**

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**W**hile some kids may feel pure excitement about heading off to summer camp, most combine those emotions with a bit of nervousness, too.

“The nerves are normal when kids are dealing with the transition from home to camp,” said Corey Dockswell, director of Camp Wicosuta, a traditional four-week sleepaway camp for girls in Hebron, New Hampshire. “The most important thing to share with your child is that they shouldn’t worry about the fact that they are feeling nervous -- it’s normal.”

“For children any step toward independence involves excitement, anticipation and nervousness. It’s completely normal,” agreed Michael Thompson, a supervising psychologist at Belmont Hill School in Belmont, Massachusetts, and author of “Homesick and Happy: How Time Away from Parents Can Help a Child Grow.”

## Homesick and happy

To alleviate anxiety about the upcoming separation, give your child some practice being away from you, for

example through sleepovers, Thompson said. Additionally, give him some role in the decision-making about which camp he will attend, he said.

Research has shown that about 80 percent of children who go to summer camp will experience some sort of mild homesickness, Thompson said.

“Many parents don’t realize it’s possible (for summer campers) to be both homesick and happy. A child can miss home, maybe cry a little bit before going to bed, but be able to wake up happy and take part in camp life,” Thompson said.

Take your cues from your child when talking about camp before it happens, and don’t project your own concerns onto your child, Dockswell said. If you have concerns as a parent, reach out to the camp director.

“Parents know their kid’s pressure points,” Dockswell said.

If a child is a picky eater or has a difficult time falling asleep on his own, ask the camp director how to help smooth the transition.

“What can you share about the routine at camp that will help make my child feel better?” Dockswell said to ask.



SEE JITTERS, PAGE 19



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## JITTERS

FROM PAGE 18

### How to handle nerves

Simply asking questions about camp, such as who will be their bunkmate or will they get their first choice of activities, doesn't mean children are feeling anxious or scared, Dockswell said.

"Respond to the question your child is asking, but avoid suggesting things you might be concerned about," he said.

While a parent wants a child to be prepared in case something goes wrong, it's not helpful to talk about all the things that could go wrong, Dockswell said.

"That could cause a child who is fine to become nervous about camp," he said.

Never promise that you will come get a child if she is not enjoying herself, Thompson said.

"Don't say, 'If it's scary, I'll come get you.' Coming to the rescue is not good parenting," he said.

Instead, assure children that they will be OK and talk about what coping skills they can use while at camp, Thompson said. Ask them if they become anxious or nervous, what will they do? Whom will they talk to?

"Mentally practice how they will handle it," Thompson said.

# Lessons for life: Being a camp counselor

By **Melissa Erickson**

More Content Now

**B**eing a camp counselor isn't all sailboats and horseback riding. This summer job helps prepare young people for future success.

"The summer camp counselor experience is invaluable to a young person," said Paul Miller, founder and editor of North Outdoors.com. "It can really be a coming-of-age phase when you are transitioning from being the instructed, the pupil, to being the caretaker and mentor. Nothing can give someone a jolt of maturity than having to suddenly think about others first -- in this case, the campers.

"Skills that a typical camp counselor learns that translate into any work experience include communication skills, leadership and, in some cases, crisis management. I can't think of a single career where those skills won't come in handy at some point," said Miller, who was a summer camp counselor at several 4-H camps in the Upper Midwest during his teen years.

Working with rambunctious campers can seem

like more than young counselors can handle, especially if the age difference is small. At 14 Carlee Linden was in charge of a group of kids only a few years younger at Clear Creek Outdoor Education Camp near Scofield, Utah.

"So many of the lessons I learned from being a camp counselor are often reflected in my office job. I think being a camp counselor taught me to take responsibility and have confidence in my work," said Linden, a content management specialist with Best-Company.com, a digital marketing media firm.

Camp counselors learn to work together and with others.

"I've learned that having mentors, developing peer networks and providing mentoring to others is so important," said Samantha C. Lu, 18, who was a counselor at the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School's Children's Summer Program in New Jersey. "These included teachers, team coaches, even my parents. I'm so grateful to having these people on my side. They taught me how to manage the interview process, get organized and prepare for working as a team."





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