

FIRST TIME AT CAMP?

Talking with your child about what to expect

By Bob Ditter, LCSW

Sending your child away to camp for the first time is a major milestone for most families, one that is often marked by excitement, anticipation and perhaps even some anxiety. Though camp is certainly about making friends and having fun, it is also about being on your own and being part of a community. One of the most important things you as a parent can do to help prepare your child for both these aspects of camp is to talk with them about it before they go. In fact, it may be better to have several occasional, shorter talks rather than one long conversation as children often absorb more when there is less to think about at one time. I also find that children do better with this sort of conversation if it is part of a more general conversation and part of a pattern of talking, either at the dinner table or while riding in the car doing errands.



THE FOLLOWING ARE SOME SAMPLE DISCUSSION TOPICS THAT WILL HELP PREPARE YOUR CHILD EMOTIONALLY FOR HIS OR HER BIG ADVENTURE:

Friends



Tell your child: If you are shy about meeting new kids, then learn to get to know others by being a good listener. Also remember, that not everyone in your cabin, bunk or group has to be your friend, and you don't have to be everyone else's friend. As long as you treat others with respect and they do the same with you, then having one or two friends at camp is fine. If you have more, then that's great, too!

Activities

Tell your child: If you tend to be a bit homesick or worried about being homesick, remember the excitement of going to camp. You may not like all the activities, or you may be better at some than others. That's normal. But you should be willing to try. The more you put into camp, the more you will get out of it!



Cooperating

Tell your child: You, like every other camper there, will be part of a cabin, bunk or group. As your parent, I hope you will cooperate with others and help out. That's part of what makes camp so special - kids helping each other out. Most kids will help you if you are friendly and help them.

Give yourself time. One thing about camp is that almost everything is new - the kids, the activities, the routines, the bed you sleep in, the bathroom. It takes a few days to get adjusted, so be patient with yourself. Most of the time you will be having so much fun you

won't mind all the changes, but if you do, remember that you will get so used to things that by the time you come home you will miss all those things!

Helping out

Tell your child: Camp is about fun, but it also requires that you help out. Clean-up is part of camp. You do it every day. As your parent, I hope you will cooperate.

Getting help



Tell your child: Everyone has good days and bad days. If you are having a problem, your counselors are there to help you. You don't have to wait to tell us if you are upset about something. After all, if your counselors don't know what might be troubling you, they can't help you. Be honest and ask for what you need. If your counselors don't seem to be concerned or don't help you, then you can go to the unit director, head counselor, etc. (Parents should know who these "back-up persons" are and how their child will recognize them if they need to).

Being positive

It's a great thing to remind your first-time camper about their strong points. I would focus not just on what they do well, but their positive qualities, such as what makes them a good friend or the type of person other kids would want to know. Helping children identify their strengths can help them when they are having a setback - one of those inevitable growing pains all children have from time to time.

Talking with your child about these kinds of issues is a great way to show support as your child gets ready to take this important step on the road to becoming more resilient and self-reliant. For you as a parent, it can give you peace of mind as you allow your child to participate safely in a broader world.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR BOB DITTER, LCSW

Bob Ditter, LCSW, is a child and family therapist living in Boston who consults extensively with people who work with children. He was a special consultant to the Disney Channel for their series Bug Juice. Ditter has visited over 500 children's camps in the United States, has been quoted in Sports Illustrated, The New York Times, Parent Magazine and the Ladies Home Journal. He has appeared on The Today Show and the Evening News with Peter Jennings and is considered one of the nation's leading experts on camp