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'Should I Be Sending My Children to Camp?'

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Some six million children in the United States are preparing psychologically to go away to sleepaway camp. Whether these departing children are camp veterans or nervous rookies, they are mentally rehearsing being away from mom and dad, their comfortable beds, their pets, favorite meals and, of course, their beloved iPhones, Facebook and video games.

During the winter their parents made the decision -- and found the money -- to make it possible for their kids to leave their families and their comfortable homes so that they could spend a week or two or four in a rustic, more-or-less uncomfortable cabin getting bitten by mosquitoes. They will live with a bunch of other kids, some of whom are fantastic, others quite annoying. They will eat a balanced diet of grilled cheese sandwiches and Fudgesicles with the occasional corn dog for good measure. They will play fun but aimless games like "Capture the Flag" and sit around campfires watching hilarious, dumb skits that almost no one remembers two days later (except the authors, of course). They will master skills such as archery and kayaking, horseback riding and waterskiing, none of which will impress their varsity coach or their AP Bio teacher when they return to school.

While the campers are messing about in the woods, many of their peers will be attending summer school or specialized skills programs. Their responsible, if sometimes Tiger-ish, moms and dads will be investing their money in their children's future differently, sending them to one-week soccer and lacrosse programs, SAT prep courses and unpaid internships designed to polish skills, boost scores and impress college admissions officers. Instead of spending three weeks at an all-around camp, these children will be focused on skill-building, sometimes in three different specialized programs to which their parents drive them every day (allowing time for that all-important debrief in the car going home).

Which set of parents has it right? Or more to the point: Does an overnight camp experience still make sense in this competitive, resume-building world? From this psychologist's point of view, the answer is a resounding YES. I believe that children develop in profound ways when they leave their parents' house and join a camp community.

Learning to sleep away from home is, of course, a critical step on the way to independence. Part of the challenge is beating homesickness, which may be hard for some children, and which, by definition, your parents cannot help you do. Kids know they have to do this sooner or later. As my son once remarked with horror, "If you can't learn to sleep away from home, you have to live with your parents for the rest of your life." But beyond that, there are things that, as a parent, you cannot do for your children, as much as you might wish to. You cannot make them happy (if you try too hard they become whiners); you cannot give them self-esteem and confidence (those come from their own accomplishments); you cannot pick friends for them and micro-

manage their social lives, and finally you cannot give them independence. The only way children can grow into independence is to have their parents open the door and let them walk out. That's what makes camp such a life-changing experience for children.

After conducting hundreds of interviews of campers and former campers for my book, "Homesick and Happy: How Time Away from Parents Can Help a Child Grow," I know that many young people do not really know how strong they are, how competent they are or even who they are until they get away from their parents and test themselves in a new and challenging environment. Many children told me the best thing about camp was, "I can really be myself here." What do they mean by that? I am pretty sure I know the answer. When children are away from their parents, they do not have to view their own life and achievements through the lens of my-athlete-father-standing-on-the-sidelines-watching-me or my-mother-is-worried-that-I'll fail. When a child is on his own, the experience is his alone, the satisfaction belongs only to him and he does not have to filter it through what his parents think and feel.

For the dedicated, loving and anxious parent, letting a child go can be tough. "Will she be happy at camp? Will he make friends? Will she be homesick?" But homesickness can often be confused with a parent's child sickness. The director of a girls' camp in Massachusetts tells me she has more and more parents of 9-year-olds calling to say, "Well, she's ready for camp, but I'm not ready to have her leave." If you want an independent child, you have to master your own child sickness. Try remembering the sweetest moments from your own childhood. Most adults tell me that the sweetest, most memorable times of their childhood were when

they were away from their parents, doing something with friends in the out-of-doors, taking a challenge or doing something a bit risky. That sounds like camp to me.

By the way, when I interviewed college admissions officers about how they view campers, they say that they think former campers are more likely to succeed in college because they have had successful experiences away from home, and they are always impressed by seniors who have been counselors looking after younger children. Camp helps build confidence and identity; it also builds leadership skills.