THIS LIFE | BRUCE FEILER

MAXIMILIAN BODE

The Care-Package Wars

I SPENT LAST WEEKEND driving my daughters around Maine visiting summer camps, including the one I attended as a child. The minute I stepped on the pine needles, walked along the waterfront and glimpsed the pitchers of bug juice, I was hit with a wave of nostalgia.

Instantly I was transported to a time of capture the flag, campfires, singalongs and, of course, bulging care packages from home containing everything from spray cheese to Fig Newtons. Hurry, better eat the Milk Duds before the raccoons arrive!

In almost every way, the camps were exactly as I had romanticized them. Except one: care packages are now strictly banned in most camps. In camp after camp, directors described how they had outlawed such packages after getting fed up with hypercompetitive parents sending oversize teddy bears and bathtubs of M&Ms.

And they're not alone. Across the country, sleep-away programs of all sizes are fighting back against overzealous status-mongers.

Not taking this in stride, parents have turned to increasingly elaborate smuggling routines, from hollowing out Harry Potter books to burrowing holes in tennis balls to get their little dumplings a taste of the checkout aisle. We have entered the age of the care-package wars, where strong-willed camps and strong-willed parents battle over control of their children's loyalty and downtime.

Heightening the stakes, a new crop of online merchants has emerged to navigate the shoals and speed up delivery of treats to America's campers. These companies, some of which operate out of Walmart-size warehouses, market to parents too busy to hunt down a shoe box, visit the market and wrangle up postage, because, hey, nothing says "I'm thinking of you" more than paying someone else to say it for you.

So how did we arrive at this moment of brinkmanship and where do we go from here?

For as long as American children have attended summer camp (around 150 years), parents have sent them stuff. The term "care package" originated after World War II when the Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe (CARE) began sending food relief across the Atlantic. The group bought up surplus 10-in-1 food parcels from the American military, which had prepared them for an invasion of Japan.

Each package included a pound of steak and kidneys; 8 ounces of liver loaf; 12 ounces of luncheon loaf (Spam); 2 pounds of coffee; and a pound each of lard, honey, raisins and chocolate. In its first two decades, the organization delivered over 100 million packages.

With such widespread popularity, the name "care package" (the acronym was lowercased in popular usage) quickly carried over to any shipment of supplies to service personnel, college students, inmates or anyone away from home. By the time I went to summer camp in the 1970s, care packages were a rare but treasured joy, as my bunkmates and I would pass around Toll House cookies, beef jerky, Mad magazine and Richie Rich comics.

While camps and parents have always clashed to some degree, everyone agrees that the problems have only worsened in recent years. Gay Gasser, the president of Mirth in a Box, a care-package distribution company in Fairfield, Conn., keeps a list of 122 camps in 22 states that now restrict deliveries. "We get parents who call us up and say: 'Oh, my God, my kid is in a bunk with someone who gets a care package every single day. We have to keep up.'"

Sealed With a Kiss, based in Merriam, Kan., bills itself as the largest care-package distributor in the United States and has a 12,000-square-foot distribution center, 25 employees and what its co-owner Malcolm Petty calls a "Level 3 call center." "During our season, we're the fourth largest shipper in the state," he said. The company has 1,800 camps in its database, he said; twice as many have restrictions today as in 2007.

> To stop competitive parents sending tubs of M&Ms, camps are outlawing packages. The result? Increasingly elaborate smuggling routines.

"Some camps don't want water toys or water blasters," Mr. Petty said. "Others don't do water balloons, chalk or anything that looks like a gun."

Camps offer all sorts of justifications for their restrictions: candy and other sweets make children too full to enjoy meals; they promote jealousies; they attract vermin. But an overriding reason is that some parents simply can't be contained.

Jim Gill, a co-owner of Fernwood Cove, in Harrison, Me., said when he bought the camp in 2004, he instituted a policy of one care package for each of the three weeks of camp. Then he cut back to two, and now he's at one. "And I'm just about to eliminate them entirely," he said. "They create such a distraction from the values we're trying to promote."

Kevin Gordon, the director of Camp Kupugani in Leaf River, Ill., also bans care packages. But when parents disregarded his warnings, he posted this clarification on his Web site, "A parcel will be considered a care package if it arrives in any of the following: a box, a padded envelope, any envelope of any type or size that appears to include anything more than one letter." All other items will be disposed of at the camp's discretion, he wrote, "especially Gummy Bears, which Kevin will eat!"

While most parents sign contracts that they will obey these rules, they mostly ignore them. I heard more techniques for getting Twizzlers into camps than getting nail files into prisons. Other tips include taping gum into the pages of magazines, stuffing chocolate bars into socks and pulling Tampax out of their cylindrical wrappers and replacing them with candy.

A friend who attended Girl Scout camp in upstate New York told me her mother used three techniques: 1) Empty out deodorant and fill it with candy, being sure to replace the protective cover before putting the cap on to make it look new; 2) buy a box of pens or pencils, dump out the contents, fill with candy; 3) carefully open a box of facial tissues, remove the bottom half, fill with candy, use hot-glue gun to reseal. When I asked permission to attach her name to these tips, she balked. "I still use these techniques to send stuff to my teenage cousins," she said.

Christopher Thurber, a clinical psychologist and researcher for the American Camp Association, said that at Camp Belknap in Tuftonboro, N.H., where he works, a parent gave a camper two cellphones. "Hand the uncharged one in when they confiscate phones," the parent said. "There's a full-charged one inside the teddy bear if you need to give us a call."

As in all game theory, this move from parents created a counter-response from camps, which now have intricate screening mechanisms that rival what the White House uses to test for ricin. Ken Robbins, of Camp Kabeyun in Alton Bay, N.H., warned parents that boys are required to come to the office during rest hour and open packages with a counselor, who reviews the contents and confiscates food and candy. "Your children's time opening packages in the office is time away from their cabin mates and counselors."

NOT ALL CAMPS have succumbed. Bobby Strauss, the director of Camp Wigwam in Harrison, Me., which I attended, told me he's a "dinosaur."

"We firmly believe that there are fewer nicer things in life than getting a care package from home while at camp," he said. He encourages families to send no more than three a season, make the contents as healthy as possible, and to include enough for the bunkmates and counselors to enjoy together.

Still, Mr. Strauss agrees with every other director I spoke with: care packages are not necessary for campers to have a good experience. Dr. Thurber, an author of "The Summer Camp Handbook," said his research found care packages make no difference in separation anxiety. If parents must send something, he added, they should send a board game or deck of cards that help the camper make friends.

As for his children, who are attending camps this summer, he won't be sending them packages. "I'll be sending handwritten letters," he said, "and asking them to hand-write me some in return. They give me a narrative of my child's experience. As a psychologist I know that the way we understand life is by storytelling. I don't want my children to be sitting around eating junk food. I want them to be telling stories."

BRUCE FEILER *'s latest book is "The Secrets of Happy Families." This Life appears monthly.*