

# FLYING SOLO AT SUMMER CAMP

Coley + Lia

## CAN YOU FIND THE HIDDEN PICTURES

While it may seem scary, going it alone can allow kids to branch out, take risks and spread their wings.

By LYNN UNDERWOOD  
lynn.underwood@startribune.com

When Astraea Smart stepped out of her mom's car at Camp Icaghowan, she felt nervous and a little scared. She was only 7 at the time and, by her own admission, very shy.

"I had never gone to an overnight camp before," recalled Smart, now a high school student in Minneapolis.

She also was alone — at her mom's urging.

"Parents might be tempted to think it will be easier if their child goes with a friend," said Smart's mother, Samantha Smart Merritt, but "having that space to learn independence while experiencing the wonder of nature is so important."

It didn't take Smart long to come around to her mother's point of view.

Within hours of being at Icaghowan, a YMCA camp in Amery, Wis., she met another girl in her cabin who shared her love of basketball. They became such fast friends that they're still close today. But going it alone did more for Smart than widen her circle of friends.

"Going by myself helped me become my own person," she said. "It taught me to be more self-reliant."

Heading off to summer camp, especially an overnight camp, without a buddy isn't for every child. Bob Gagner, executive director at Camp Icaghowan, estimates that half of his campers come with a pal from the neighborhood or a school chum.

Still, many camp directors, counselors and campers themselves say that those who try it get a big payoff. Camp can provide a safe environment where kids can break out of their molds, develop their relationship skills and learn more about themselves.

In fact, being away from their school friends encourages kids, tweens and teens to spread their wings.

"Some kids don't want friends from home because they get to start with a clean slate without any kind of social history and reputation to live up to or live down," said Christopher Thurber, a New Hampshire-based psychologist who consults and holds training workshops for summer camp programs and has written a camp handbook. "They want that 'specialness' of that time in the summer."

Camp continues on E16 ▶

↑  
Will

Within this illustration are items often used at camp.

ax	guitar
binoculars	horseshoe
bow & arrow	mug
bug spray	pencil & notepad
camera	pocket knife
canteen	sleeping bag
compass	socks
canoe & paddle	sunglasses
cowboy hat	tennis racket
flashlight	toothbrush

Answer key E16

Summer camp guide E4-1

SEE OUR interactive map searchable guide at [startribune.com/campguide](http://startribune.com/campguide)

# Flying solo at summer camp

## ◀ CAMP FROM E1

Katy Droske, dean of the French Village at Concordia Language Camp, also advocates that kids go to camp on their own. "If you come alone, you can decide — in this safe and unique setting — how you want to create yourself and explore who you are," she said.

A surprising number of kids discover a self that's independent and confident.

When Adam Lockhart was a teenager in the 1980s, he went alone to YMCA Camp Menogyn near Grand Marais, Minn. He credits his time at the Gunflint Trail camp for teaching him skills he needed to build new relationships.

"It helps you learn how to connect with different kinds of people you'll meet in high school and college, and be comfortable in situations where you

don't know anyone," he said.

Camp staff members work hard to create an open, accepting atmosphere where campers feel safe, comfortable and "free to try things without the fear of being judged," said Camp Icaghowan's Gagner. "Everyone is in the same boat — and laughing."

Still, Gagner and other camp directors are quick to point out that signing up with a friend isn't frowned upon. He advises parents to consider how their child interacts with others

before deciding which scenario is best. "If they've had challenges in the past being new and coming into a group, they may need a friend to ease them through that," said Gagner.

And camps ensure that having a buddy won't detract from the camp experience.

"If they have anxiety about being away from home, it's nice to have a familiar face," said Krista Strobel, a former Camp Foley counselor. Having a friend in your tent can help some kids get more comfort-

able in a wilderness setting, said Owen Larson, who leads canoe trips to the BWCA for Camp Menogyn.

Camp staffers encourage kids to break away from their BFF now and then because being too closely tied to someone else can hinder growth and exploration.

"If a kid wants to go sailing, but the friend is not interested, it may prevent them from doing it," said Marie Schmid, executive director of Camp Foley in Pine River.

Lockhart now sends his son Alek to Camp Menogyn, the same camp he attended as a boy. His son goes solo because he's learned what his dad learned 30 years ago.

"I never went with a friend," said Lockhart. "But I always left with friends."

**« IF YOU COME ALONE, YOU CAN DECIDE — IN THIS SAFE AND UNIQUE SETTING — HOW YOU WANT TO CREATE YOURSELF AND EXPLORE WHO YOU ARE. »**

Katy Droske, dean of the French Village at Concordia Language Camp

Lynn Underwood • 612-673-7619