

Summer Camp: Often more than fun for kids

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It is the iconic image of summer – spending time at camp in the mountains, swimming and canoeing, making lanyards, singing songs around a campfire and then giggling with bunkmates late into the night.

At summer camp, memories are made and lifelong friendships are forged. But psychologists say it can also be an important developmental experience.



“Research shows that camp helps children increase their sense of independence and self-reliance, their willingness to try new things and take healthy risks, and increases their skill and knowledge,” said Chris Thurber, a clinical psychologist and co-author of the “Summer Camp Handbook.” “Day for day, we see much more accelerated growth in these areas than when children are spending time at school or at home.”

According to research by the nonprofit American Camp Association, an overwhelming

number of children report positive gains from camp, including helping to make new friends (95 percent), getting to know kids who are different from themselves (93 percent) and helping them feel good about themselves (92 percent), says the organization’s CEO, Tom Holland.

There are also gains for parents, says Holland, including finding that their children gained self-confidence and a continued interest in new activities they learned at camp.

Often, it’s also a good time for parents to enjoy one-on-one time with a sibling who stays behind, or to benefit from a break from parenting to get that room repainted or go out on their own fun experiences.

Avoiding the homesick blues

Thurber has advice for parents on how to minimize the intensity of a first-year campers’ homesickness.

It is normal for anyone spending time away from home and loved ones to feel homesick, and in Thurber’s academic studies he has found that 80 percent to 95 percent of boys and girls report feeling homesick at some point during their overnight camp experience. Most experience it mildly,

while about 7 percent suffer from more intense homesickness and its symptoms of nervousness, anxiety, sadness or depression.

Thurber's No. 1 piece of advice for parents: Do not make a "pickup deal" with your child.

"That's the death knell of a camp stay. If you promise to pick them up if they feel homesick, it becomes a crutch and undermines children's confidence," he said. "If you make that promise, then you have two crummy alternatives as a parent. Either you rob them of this rich developmental experience, or you renege on a promise and erode their trust in you."

Build up your child's confidence with practice stays away from home, such as a weekend at their grandparents' house or a sleepover with a friend, Thurber advises. And involve your child in decisions surrounding the camp experience, from choosing which camp to attend to shopping together for supplies they need.

"That gives a child a very real sense that this is my experience, and I get to have some say over how it goes," Thurber said.

Anne Jeffrey, director of the YMCA's Camp E.L.K. in Wrightwood, encourages families to attend a camp's open house together, and to ask as many questions as they have.

Also, it can help to communicate with your child while he or she is away. "We encourage parents to write or send a letter. Everyone loves getting mail at camp," Jeffrey said.

"It's normal for parents to feel anxious," Thurber said. "What you need to do is share your apprehension with another grown-up, not your child."

"If your child asks, 'What if I feel homesick?' parents should be ready with a response that is positive and optimistic," he said. "We'll be here when camp is over, and if you do have feelings of homesickness you will be able to talk with the staff at camp about it."

Practical advice

According to the ACA, the average cost of day camp nationwide in 2015 was \$271 per week, and the average cost per week of overnight camp was \$704. Parents should take note that a higher price for a camp does not ensure higher quality.

"When it comes to camp, price and quality are not correlated," Thurber said.

Instead, parents should consider three things: Is a camp accredited? What is the return rate of its staff? (The higher the percentage, the more loyal and experienced its staff members will be, he says.) Finally, look for an experienced camp director.