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Phone-Sick at Camp

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A camper writing a letter at Camp Walden in Diamond Point, N.Y.

Leaving for sleepaway camp is, for many children, a major step toward independence. Today, when cellphones keep parents and children in nearly constant contact, the fact that most camps have phone-free policies makes breaking away even more of a challenge.

“Camp-age kids, by even 10 or 11, are used to texting and being in frequent contact with their parents,” said **Christopher Thurber**, a clinical psychologist who focuses on youth development and summer camp. “How we communicate has changed the nature of attachment, and it complicates the separation that kids and parents go through,” he said.

According to a [Pew Research Center study](#), teenagers send and receive an average of 67 texts per day. Kids are on their phones in school, in restaurants, on vacations and even in bed. For many, sleepaway camp remains one of the last oases, largely untouched by technology.

Yalda T. Uhls, author of “Media Moms & Digital Dads” and a child development expert with Common Sense Media, [conducted a study](#) showing that sixth graders who spent just five days at a tech-free sleepaway camp developed greater understanding of real-world interpersonal communication cues, including a better ability to read facial expressions, make eye contact, and interpret tone of voice and other prompts, such as posture and keeping an appropriate spatial distance with others.

“Camp is a sacred space to unplug and be able to learn independence and social skills,” Dr. Uhls said. “It’s really important to put devices down and practice the art of face-to-face communication.”

Putting down the phone can be at least as hard for the parents, who are often anxious about separating from their children and are used to constant check-ins, whether they are in the next state or the next room. We may complain that our children are always on the phone but “the reality is that we want that instant access to our children,” Dr. Uhls said.

Corey Dockswell, the director of Camp Wicosuta, a girls’ camp in Hebron, N.H., said the no-phone rule can be tough for parents. “They’ll say, ‘I’m used to talking to her all the time,’” she said. “It’s a steep learning curve for them.”

When Carrie Irvin, president of a nonprofit in Washington, D.C., decided to send her two daughters to Wicosuta, it was a difficult transition. “I have a really hard time dialing it back but I needed it. It was so important for them and our relationship, and I’m grateful that camp made me do it,” she said.

With this constant communication, children seek their parents’ guidance and emotional support even when they are not together, leaving fewer opportunities to develop their own confidence and internal compass for decision-making. Wendy Mogel, a clinical psychologist and the author of the parenting book “The Blessing of a Skinned Knee,” tells the story of a college student at a salad bar who texted her mother to ask if she liked ranch dressing, rather than testing it herself. Such dependent relationships can rob children of the chance to trust and believe in someone else besides their parents. Creating bonds with others is one of the most important benefits of camp, and it is more likely to happen without the electronic connection to home.

At Camp Walden in Diamond Point, N.Y., “we talk about phones all the time. It’s a huge change in their life,” said Lauren Bernstein, the owner and director. And campers aren’t the only ones unplugging. Counselors and staff members are allowed to use phones only during their time off, so campers rarely even see a cellphone. “It’s important that our entire team live like the kids do,” she said. “Camp is a different world, and we want to keep it that way.”

But many camps are using workarounds, sending a daily email blast and photos of children engaging in camp activities, for example. Some also allow parents to email campers daily – printing out the messages and distributing them to campers at mail time.

To prepare to detach for camp, Dr. Thurber recommends families try one tech-free day per week over the month before camp, with no recreational screen time. “It’s good to practice some withholding from real-time digital communication and learn to not reflexively reach for cellphones,” he said.

Children and parents can get ready by drafting practice letters or journal entries with a bit more of a narrative than the brief, immediate social media contact they are used to. Counsel your child on using an appropriate greeting and sign-off and writing with adjectives that actually describe how they’re feeling rather than using emojis. The goal is to arrive at camp with those new skills in place.

Some kids say unplugging from social media is a relief. Sofia Jacobson, 12, who attends Camp Walden, said, “I love having a break from it. It’s nice to let go and not have to think about what anyone else is doing.”

Finally, parents can help their children and themselves by shifting their mind-set and creating positive expectations for cutting the electronic umbilical cord. Rather than seeing a break from technology as some sort of punishment, view it as an opportunity to be present, nurture relationships and be creative.

“The single most important fact about sleepaway camp is that children are away from their parents, where they experience their camp as their own, their camp friends as their own, and the experience as their own,” said Michael Thompson, the author of “Homesick and Happy: How Time Away from Parents Can Help a Child Grow.”

He added, “You cannot ever fully experience things as your own when your mother is looking over your shoulder, actually or electronically.”