

# PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR OVERNIGHT CAMP

Going to camp can be one of the most impacting experiences in your child's faith journey. It also presents a huge opportunity for your child to grow in his/her ability to navigate life on so many levels...self-care, building relationships, making choices, etc. As parents, you play a key role in making your child's camp experience successful. There are many ways you can prepare your child in the weeks leading up to camp so that he or she feels prepared, knows what to expect and is confident in his/her ability to navigate the unique demands that 'sleep-away' camp requires. We have prepared this list of suggestions with the hope that you will read it and take seriously the very significant role you play in making your child's camp experience the very best it can be. By following through with these suggestions, we are confident that your child will arrive at camp practically prepared, freeing him or her to experience a life-changing week. Thanks in advance for partnering with us! And know, we are available to answer any questions you may have.

1. Talk to other families who have gone to the camp in years past to familiarize yourself with what goes on.
2. Have your child spend a weekend with a friend. This is a practice time being away from home and parents. No phone calls. Talk about it with your child afterwards.
3. Go over the daily schedule with your child so there are no surprises. Learn as much as you can about camp life.
4. Teach your child how to care for him/herself. Children need to know how to select appropriate clothing, put clothes away, straighten their sleeping space, shower and care for their personal hygiene needs, set a table, carry out chores, etc. This is very, very important to your child's feeling of success at camp. Some parents pack a suitcase and have their child live out of it for a week at some point leading up to camp. This is very, very helpful so kids have an opportunity to work out how best to organize their stuff. It can be very empowering to a child to be involved in the decision making process of packing their stuff in a way that they can maintain.
5. Involve your child in the packing. Let him or her bring a favorite T-shirt or a special stuffed animal. Familiar items will help make your child more com-

fortable in unfamiliar surroundings.

6. Problem solve with your child by using "what if" situations to prepare for unexpected events. What if you lose your flashlight? What if you don't get along with another child? What if you don't feel well? Let your child brainstorm for solutions and make sure they know the "chain of command" at camp for handling problems. The first person they need to go to is their Counselor. If they need further assistance, they can go to the Coach and then to their Dean. If they aren't feeling well, the counselor will refer them to the camp nurse.
7. Familiarize your child with the outdoors. Many city children are unfamiliar with total darkness and country night sounds. Practice walking in the dark with a flashlight.
8. Missing Home can be an issue. Missing home, parents, pets or friends is pretty normal. It is part of growing up and leaving home. Speak openly about it before camp and your child will experience these feelings with less anxiety and more understanding. Please be careful in your tone. Stay positive! By expressing your own worries the child may become more anxious and uncertain about going away to camp.

Avoid statements like "I'm going to be so lonely without you!" Don't make your child feel guilty about going away.

Heighten your child's interest by pointing out some of the exciting things you remember about your own camping experience. Be sure to be positive about how you were able to handle being away from your mom and dad.

While painting a bright, promising picture of camp, be sure his expectations are realistic. He'll be expected to really work on some new skills, share in camp chores (such as making his own bed and taking turns sweeping the cabin), be an active member of a group, etc.

Avoid making deals about early pickups. This undermines children's confidence and sets them up for failure. Encourage them instead that they will do really well away from home. Please don't say, "If

you have problems, call us and we'll come get you." A camper thus invited to fail is likely to give up at the first difficulty, abandon thoughts of adjusting to camp, and focus immediately on going home. You might say something like, "This is a commitment for one camp session. We expect you to have lots of fun... but if it's hard at times, you have to stick with it. If you don't like it, you don't have to go back... but no changing your mind in the middle!"

9. Communicate with camp officials. Let them know if there are special circumstances or considerations regarding your child's well being or behavior. There is a place on the registration form to indicate needs, but please help us if your child has special needs by communicating those needs clearly. If you feel you need to inform us further than the registration form allows, please contact the camp office and they will connect you to the right person
10. Discuss communication at camp with your child. We do not allow phone calls directly to or from campers. Past history has proven that they are not a good idea. Some campers may be doing just fine 'til the sound of a parent's voice triggers a setback unexpected by either party. If there is a problem with your child camp staff will utilize the emergency numbers you have provided to keep you informed. If for some reason you do wind up on the phone with a crying, homesick child, you need to be supportive, encouraging, positive about his ability to adjust, and absolutely firm about "sticking it out". "Just try it one more day" is likely to translate to, "I'm going home in a day!" It's an invitation to fail; it leaves open the possibility of going home as a goal just when the focus needs to be on adjusting to camp. "You must stay" is more likely to translate to, "Well, I don't have a choice, so I might as well make the best of it..."
11. Send letters to your child before camp begins so mail is waiting when he/she arrives. Keep your letters simple. Send a cute card, the sports or comics from the newspaper, a package with a word game, etc. Focus your letter on what is happening at camp and things which give confidence as opposed to telling the child what they are missing.

## HOW TO TALK ABOUT CAMP

Sending your child away to camp for the first time is a major milestone for most families, one that is often marked by excitement, anticipation, and perhaps even some anxiety. Though camp is certainly about making friends and having fun, it is also about being on your own and being a part of a community. One of the most important things you as a parent can do to help prepare your child for both these aspects of camp is to talk

with your child about it before he/she goes. In fact, it is much better to have several occasional, shorter talks rather than one long conversation as children often absorb more when there is less to think about at one time. We also find that children do better with this sort of conversation if it is part of a general conversation and if it is part of a pattern of talking, either at the dinner table or while riding in the car. Also, Make sure these conversations allow children to do the talking about their thoughts and feelings in anticipation of the summer.

The following are some sample topics for discussion that will help prepare your child emotionally for their big adventure:

## FRIENDS

Clearly this is central to camp life and each child has his/her own way of going about making friends. Concrete advice is helpful, along with the reminder that other children are in the same boat and will be looking to connect. Ask your child how s/he has made friends in the past and then help him/her figure out how those moments can be repeated on the bus to camp, at meal-times, in classes, etc.

If you are shy about meeting new kids, then learn to get to know others by being a good listener. Remember also that not everyone in your cabin, bunk, or group has to be your friend, and you don't have to be everyone else's friend. As long as you treat others with respect and they do the same with you, then having one or two friends at camp is fine. If you have more, then that's great!...

For returning campers or those coming here with a friend, we expect all children to reach out to other campers. Take time to have your child come up with ideas about how they will 1) include others as they maintain existing friendships, and 2) negotiate these pre-existing friendships in specific settings.

## ACTIVITIES

There are many exciting things to do at camp, many of which you may never have tried before. If your child tends to be a bit homesick or worried about being homesick, remind him/her about the excitement of going to camp. Remember, when you first decided to go to camp, what made you so excited? You may not like all the activities, or you may be better at some than others. That's normal. I, however, hope you are willing to try. The more you put into camp, the more you will get out of it!

## ADJUSTING

Give yourself time. One thing about camp is that almost everything is new – the kids, the activities, the routines, the bed you sleep in, the bathroom.[You might brainstorm with your child all the things that will be new.] It takes a few days to get adjusted, so be patient with yourself. Most of the time you will be having so much fun you won't mind all the changes, but if you do, remember that you get so used to things that by the time you come home you will miss all those things!

## COOPERATING

You, like every other camper there, will be part of a cabin, bunk, or group. As your parent, I hope you will cooperate with others and help out. That's part of what makes camp so special – kids helping each other out. Most kids will help you if you are friendly and help them.

## HELPING OUT

Camp is about fun, but it also requires that you help out. Clean-up is part of camp. You do it every day! Everyone is expected to chip in! I am confident that you will be a blessing to your group by having a great attitude and jumping into help in any way you can! A great quality leaders possess is initiative. That means seeing stuff that needs to be done and doing it without having to be told to do it. You can be a blessing to your leaders and a set a great example for your group by not waiting for the leader to always have to ask you to clean up or be ready and prepared for the next event.

## GETTING HELP

Everyone has good days and bad days. If you are having a problem, your counselor is there to help you! You don't have to wait to tell us if you are upset about something. After all, if your counselor doesn't know what might be troubling you, he/she can't help you. Be honest and ask for what you need. If your counselor doesn't seem to be concerned or doesn't help you, then you can go to your coach and then your dean. These people will be introduced to you at the start of camp and they will be with you every day.

Ask you child, "How do you get help at home or school, with friends, during after school activities? Well, it'll be the same at camp, only with new people who are here to assist you with any sort of problem."

## BEING POSITIVE

It's a great thing to remind your first-time camper about his or her strong points. Focus not just on what he/she does well, but his/her positive qualities as well, such as what makes them a good friend or the type of person other kids would want to know. Helping children identify their strengths can help them when they are having a setback – one of those inevitable growing pains all children have from time to time. Help them figure out strengths such as listening, a work ethic, creativity, being organized, thoughtful, a good friend, etc. Then talk about how these might help them. For example, a particularly empathic child may be able to help another child who is sad. An organized camper will get their bed area set up to feel comfortable and look really "cool." An extroverted child knows s/he will make friends. These are foundations upon which a camper can build a sense of him- or herself in a new social context

Talking with your child about these kinds of issues is a great way to show support as your child gets ready to take this important step in their faith journey as well as growing to being more resilient and self-reliant. For you as a parent, it can give you more peace of mind as you allow your child to participate safely in a broader world.

## FINALLY FOR GROWN UPS

We recognize that the camp experience is a special one for parents too, and we support your efforts over the months/weeks leading up to camp. Please feel free to contact us if you have questions. Also, remember that one of the very best ways to support your child's faith journey and grow in your ability to minister to your child is to join us in making camp happen. Your involvement gives you a sneak peak and a platform to talk about his/her experiences. Although most positions fill up fast, we want to hear from you if the Lord is leading you to serve at camp. If you are not able to serve at camp during the week, maybe you are available to help with camp set up on Sunday, June 23rd from 10am-4pm or the evening of June 24th where we will have a concession stand for evening activities. Just call to take part! And don't forget about our CAMP RECAP on Thursday, June 27th at 4:30pm in the Family Room. We need a team to help set up and serve!

Thank you and God bless you and your family!

