

INTERNATIONAL SPORTS TRAINING CAMP

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TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD BOB DITTER, L.C.S.W.

Sending your child away to camp for the first time is a major milestone for most families, one that is often marked by excitement, anticipations, 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 talk with your child about it before he or she goes.

In fact, it may be 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. I also find that children do better with this sort of conversation if it is part of a more general conversation and if it is part of a pattern of talking, either at the dinner table or while riding in the car doing errands.

FRIENDS

Camp is not anything if it is not about making new friends. 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!

ACTIVITIES

There are many exciting things to do at camp, many of which you may never tried before. If your child tends to be a bit homesick or worried about being homesick, remind him or 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!

HELPING OUT

Camp is about fun, but it also requires that you help out. Cleanup is part of camp. You do it every day! As your parent, I hope you will cooperate!

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 or 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 go to the head counselor.

BEING POSITIVE

It's a great thing to remind your first-time camper about his or her strong points. I would focus not just on what they do well, but their 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.

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 on the road 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.

Bob Ditter, L.C.S.W., one of the nation's leading experts on camp, is a child and family therapist living in Boston who consults extensively in the area of child development. He was special consultant to the Disney Channel and has been quoted in Sports Illustrated, The New York Times, Parent Magazine, and the Ladies Home Journal.