

PARENTS AND CAMPS FOSTER CHILDREN'S SELF-RELIANCE **MARLA COLEMAN**

Camp is a stepping-stone to self-reliance! It is probably the only community that exists in which children can learn to navigate on their own without well-intentioned parental course-plotting to avert choppy waters. As a parent, I confess to the compelling desire to negotiate smooth sailing for my own children. Yet, over the years, as a camp director, I have witnessed, first-hand, the incredible journeys of children who come to recognize their own power in steering their own destinies. Opportunities for decision-making and problem-solving at camp, which foster a culture of success, allow children to discover their strengths and their abilities to make good choices and to influence positive outcomes for themselves.

After all, coaching kids to feel capable is what camp directors do. Not quite so obvious but just as central is their proficiency to coach parents to support their children with just the right combination of back-up and encouragement. Kids learn quickly to rely upon themselves and the adults they trust at camp instead of their parents, who could be one hundred miles away or more!

Ariel, a second-year camper, casually asked me during camp, "Does my Mom still call every day?" She and Mom had fallen into a predictable pattern: Ariel would tell her mom about "what was wrong" (we know that kids tend to "save" things for their parents!), and Mom would dutifully call the camp to "fix" the problem. They were each doing their "jobs." Carefully and slowly, with appropriate guidance, Mom came to understand that she was perpetuating a cycle that was preventing her daughter from being independent. As trust increased, she started redirecting her daughter's pleas, encouraging her to speak with someone at camp who could more quickly and efficiently help her resolve the situation-yet still validating Ariel's feelings.

I was gratified to answer Ariel's query: "Actually, no," to which Ariel quickly responded: "That's because I stopped complaining to her!" Lessons learned for both parent and child!

"Aha's" like this happen every day at camp. How can parents and camps cooperate to help children gain just the right degree of independence?

- Remember that camp directors have a reservoir of experiences to back their counsel to you. Know, too, that they have your child's best interests at heart and the skill to guide your child towards an appropriate level of independence, self-confidence, and success.
- Keep in mind that kids often triumph over their adjustment to a new environment before their parents can accept the next stage of their development! Do not offer to rescue your child; that only confirms for him that you believe he cannot cope with something that is difficult.
- Get on board with the notion of supporting kids to solve their own problems or asking a trusted counselor for help; let her experience the real world in the camp setting, not the one that you sculpt for her during the rest of the year. Picture success!

Admittedly, it is a leap of faith to let your baby bird fly from the nest; it is the greatest gift you can bestow.

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