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Effectively Communicating With Parents



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Parents, especially first time parents, are excited yet extremely nervous as they put their child on the bus or plane and entrust them to a camp and counselors they may have never met and often know nothing about. They are probably most concerned about their child's physical and emotional safety. Will they be adequately supervised? How well are the staff trained? How well are the staff screened before being hired? What about sex offenders? What about counselors who drink? Who smoke? And on another note, will my child be accepted into the camp culture? Will they feel secure within themselves and positive about their camp experience? The list goes on and on. Just as we need to help campers separate from parents and become more independent, we need to do the same for parents. Sensitivity to parents' worries and concerns about sending their children away to camp is critical.

Homesickness is a concern for campers, but "Child Sickness" is something we don't give equal weight. With the advent of technology, parents are even more connected to their children than ever before. Cell phones, texting, email keep parents connected to their children at all times. Most camps do not use this technology and parents therefore often struggle with cutting the wire and having limited contact and access to their child. This is especially true for first time parents. Contact is generally restricted the first week or two as well. Helping parents realize that time for themselves is an important ingredient in good parenting and entrusting their children to a safe and positive place is a gift they are giving to their child. Quoting research to parents that cites the benefits of camp which include social skills development, including leadership responsibility, resilience and resourcefulness are helpful for parents who often feel guilty in "sending their child away." Former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, and former chair of America's Promise -The Alliance for Youth, believes that camp "gets them away from a neighborhood or situation that may exist in their neighborhood that isn't healthy.... It teaches them how to get along with other people – both other young people as well as adults. To give our children a safe place to learn and grow – camp does that."

Like many kids today, parents in general feel more entitled, more privileged, and are more demanding than in years before. They believe that they are paying a great deal to send their children to camp and won't settle for less than they expect. Parents need to feel that their concerns are foremost in the camp director's mind and that these needs are being attended to ASAP. Helping a parent feel heard and understood helps to reduce anger, ease often difficult situations, and gets the parent on board. However, there needs to be a fine balance between responding to parental requests and allowing campers to learn to problem solve without parental assistance.

An important thing to keep in mind is that very often parents who contact camp with complaints or requests are really very anxious. What often initially appears as a demanding and unreasonable parent, may actually be a very anxious parent who is struggling with a loss of control by sending their child to sleep away camp. Responding to this anxiety, rather than only directly to their demands usually offers much better results and results in more positive interactions. Statements that allow the parent to feel more in control reduce anxiety and, in turn, allow the camp to make the same decision they likely would have without alienating the parent. Parents don't want to hear about camp policies and procedures. They are not interested in generalizations. Quite frankly, they are generally not interested in anything other than their child and their immediate concerns. Statements such as, "I can only imagine how hard it must be for you as a parent to send your child off to camp for the first time," and "What do you think would be best for YOUR child ," and "How can we make YOU feel more comfortable in this situation," help a parent feel better understood. Parents want to feel that they are included in decisions and that their opinions count.

By working with parents and helping them to feel that camp is a joint venture and one that they feel part of helps reduce parental concerns and requests and keeps parents happy. And as we know, a Happy Parent is a Happy Director!!

For additional resources for parents check out The University of Michigan Health System's Summer Camp Resources Page at <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/summercamp.htm>

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