

Camps support independence in safe setting

Many children say happiest experiences were those not involving parents

BY DOLORES FOX CIARDELLI

Today's parents may wrestle with giving their children independence while keeping them safe. School offers some opportunities — and so do summer camps.

Camp is a place for kids to develop new interests and explore their own identities without the pressures they have at school or at home. In the relaxed atmosphere of camp, they can get out of their comfort zone and be ready

to try new things, which will help them gain independence and confidence.

In "Homesick and Happy: How Time Away from Parents Can Help a Child Grow," psychologist Michael Thompson cites a study in which people were asked their happiest childhood memories. More than 80% shared a memory when their parents were not involved.

Thompson interpreted this to mean that children like to accomplish something on

their own, without worrying about what their parents would think. Such moments also give them a feeling of accomplishment.

Even day camps can teach children to be independent, something that may be hard to achieve with parents involved in their lives every day. This may be the first time a child makes friends who their parents don't know.

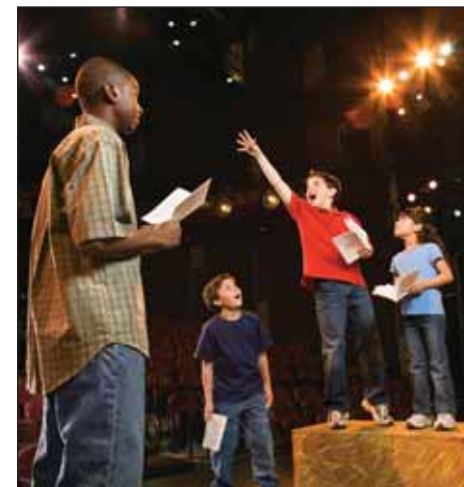
At first, some parents may find the thought of sending their little ones off to camp overwhelming, Thompson writes.

"But parents' first instinct — to shelter their offspring above all else — is actually depriving kids of the major developmental milestones that occur through letting them go — and watching them come back transformed," he explains.

The world is a scary place for parents, although few would deny the importance of becoming independent. Summer camp is the perfect time and place for this as children grow without being under the watchful eyes of parents.

Campers seem more open to new experiences, like sports they are encouraged to play. And they do things like make their beds and take their plates to the sink without being asked.

At both day camps and overnight camps, children learn to balance different personalities and backgrounds in a respectful manner, a skill that will help them be independent. They also



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are responsible for their own items, such as swimming gear and lunches.

Camps are also important today because they get children away from technology. A lot of growing can be done when they leave behind distractions such as video games and smartphones as well as the pressures of their everyday lives.

Instead of using social media, kids learn to communicate directly, talking to their new friends face to face. Emojis don't exist unless they are sketched by hand or toed in the dirt.

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Children socialize differently at camp than at school. Learning differences aren't noted as at school, so everyone fits in. The energetic ones who might get in trouble in the classroom may discover they are leaders.

Campers are guided by counselors who are not quite viewed as teachers but are not their peers either, so while their support is important it still allows campers to gain independence.

Feedback from counselors is meaningful to campers, and their recognition of a job well done can be powerful for a child, especially if they suspect that parents might be a bit subjective. They also learn how much they can do without their folks hovering nearby.

Going to camp means new experiences, getting away from the family and fending for

oneself. Camps are about exploring, and this may be rare in young lives where activities are scripted and tightly scheduled. At camp, boys and girls learn that they can choose activities, make friends and do things on their own.

Parents report that children come back from camp changed, with new emotional and social skills, such as being team members and knowing how to assess risks and cope with hardships.

At camp, not only do children experience independence from their parents and from their gadgets, they also learn age-old camping skills — such as roasting a perfect marshmallow — and create memories to cherish throughout their lifetimes. ■

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