

# SEND YOUR CHILD TO CAMP WITH DIGNITY/CONFIDENCE

By Dr. Alice Ginott

Parents need a vacation from children, but even when their youngsters go to camp it rarely is a real separation. Despite geographical distance, many continue to suffer their children's pains, frustrations and disappointments. They even attempt to solve problems via long-distance. Camp offers children an ideal opportunity to begin the process of growing away from parents. But they need help. Becoming independent is scary.

Children are not sure they can cope. Some feel their parents cannot get along without them.

When parents are confident in their children's ability to do well on their own, they give them the necessary self-assurance to meet new challenges.

Here are some guidelines that can help your child grow up and become more independent while spending a summer at camp.

Allow your child to leave without guilt.

Parental fears make children feel guilty. It is NOT helpful to say, "I'll be lonely without you" or "I'll worry about you" or "The house will be empty without you." These words may be sincere, but what children need is a show of strength, not parental fears.

Very often, to reassure her parents, a child will resist going to camp at the last minute. She looks at her mother, sees her ambivalence, senses her sadness at separation, and tells her loudly, if not clearly, "If you are that concerned I won't go. I'll stay with you."

What is a helpful response to a child's unexpected resistance?

Acknowledge her concern: "You wish you didn't have to go."

Voice her conflict: "You feel two ways about it. You want to go but you also want to stay home. We know it's not easy to be away from home for the first time. But summer is for adventure and Daddy and I have confidence in you."

What is a helpful response to child's unexpected resistance?

When Mrs. Green made this statement to her 9-year-old son, he stopped crying and reassured his mother: "O.K., Mom. I'll go to camp but don't worry, I still love you."

Physical distance does not seem to stop children from trying to involve parents in their problems. They write letters of complaint and despair. "Camp stinks." "I'm miserable." "Come and get me or I'll run away." "The counselors hate me."

How are parents to respond? By making children feel parental confidence in their ability to cope. Here's how one parent answered a letter of complaint.

"Dear Midge: We read your letter and were impressed by how clearly you stated your feelings and wishes. We know that it is not easy for you. You're dissatisfied with your bunkmates and counselors. Even the activities do not come up to your expectations. You are homesick and miss us. We love you and have faith in your capacity to make a good summer for yourself. We're looking forward to talking to you when we pick you up. Is there anything you want us to bring? Love, Mom"

"That letter was helpful because it acknowledges Midge's complaints with dignity and ignored her threats with tact. It did not argue, coax or cajole. It stated expectations and expressed confidence.

Most children are anxious when they leave home for the first time. Not all express their fears in words. Some do it in pictures. They have nightmares, especially during the first few nights away from home.

How can parents help? By learning how to respond to fear in order to diminish it: A child's fears should not be belittled. Fear does not disappear when its existence is not recognized. Therefore it is not helpful to say: "There's nothing to be afraid of." Nor does it help to be told: "Go ahead. Cry. You'll feel better. You might say, "Even if you cry because you are sad, you *will* get over it."

A child's fear should be acknowledged with respect. For example:

"It's not easy to be away from home especially at night, but your counselors are there."

"If you wake up scared, your counselors will help you."

"Your counselors are here to take care of you."