Camp countdown: helping kids emotionally prepare for summer camp

Going away to camp can be the highlight of a child's year: after all, a cabin full of friends and non-stop fun without parental rules seems like a great proposition.



But the idea of being away from home can also be daunting to children—especially for those who've never been before—and can stir up feelings of anxiety or a fear of the unknown.

Emotionally preparing your kids for camp is just as important as packing that extra sweater and raincoat. Amidst the last-minute panic to get ready, it's also a step that can be easily forgotten. Help your child gear up for summer camp physically and emotionally with tried and true tactics to ensure summer fun.

Get kids involved. Engaging kids in the decisions about their camp experience is a great way to prepare them emotionally. Help kids feel more confident and relaxed by allowing them some say in the choosing of the camp, the amount of time away from home and the activities they can register for.

Practice, practice, practice. Having short, overnight trips away from home can be a great way to prepare a child for a longer stay at camp. "Camping out" at a friend's or family member's house overnight allows a child to test the waters of separation in a comfortable and familiar environment. Kids can also practice writing letters during this time. Remember to provide pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes and paper before children leave home to make the task of writing a letter that much easier.

Leave on a good note. Stay positive when dropping a child off at camp. Avoid using phrases like, "I hope all goes well" or, "What will I do without you?" as they can leave a child worried that something bad might happen while away from home.

Know what to pack. Different camps have different activities. Knowing if a child will need a funny outfit for a theme dinner or whether there's a no two-piece policy for the pool will save both parent and child frustration. Camps often send out packing checklists which are a great starting point and when in doubt, touch base with the camp and ask what's expected. It might also be a good idea to connect with other parents whose children attended the camp in the previous year to find out about packing essentials.

Keep the nurse in the know. It can be hard to hand over the reigns of a child's care, especially when it comes to health. Gain some peace of mind by speaking directly to the camp nurse and counsellors to ensure they understand your child's medical condition, medication schedule and/or allergies fully and completely. It's also wise to provide these instructions in writing.

Accept that homesickness happens. Research suggests 90 per cent of children experience some level of homesickness while at camp. Let kids know it's normal and okay to feel sad and miss home while away and that they shouldn't keep these feelings to themselves. By recognizing and accepting homesickness as a fact of life, kids can manage their expectations and avoid a big "letdown" when they start to miss Mom, Dad and their own bed.

Camp is a great way for kids to meet new friends and bask in the great outdoors, but it's also more than that. It's a unique opportunity to explore new activities, overcome challenges and discover a sense of independence. By helping kids prepare emotionally and physically for all these new experiences, you'll also give them the tools they need to build lasting memories.