



CHILDHOOD

Summer Camp: Great for Kids, Even Better for Parents

Psychologist Michael Thompson makes the case in his new book that overnight camp is the antidote to parenting in the age of anxiety

By Bonnie Rochman | Aug. 03, 2012

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I've spent a good bit of time away from my kids this summer. My 9-year-old went on a month-long trip to Alaska with his grandparents, while my 7-year-old had her first taste of sleepaway camp in a four-night introductory session. I wasn't worried about either of them. My son, after all, was with my parents. And my daughter scarcely glanced back as she boarded the bus to camp. Homesick? Hardly.



Getty Images

While I constantly wondered what they were up to, my kids didn't seem to notice that my husband and I had been removed from their family equation. They did just fine without me reminding them to slather on sunscreen or to eat their veggies. More than fine, actually; they each had a blast.

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Little did I know that I was doing them a huge favor by kissing them goodbye and sending them off to manage without me. But psychologist Michael Thompson wrote an entire book about the importance of a little child-parent separation. *Homesick and Happy: How Time Away from Parents Can Help a Child Grow* urges helicopter parents to land their hovercraft and set their kids free for the summer. These days, of course, setting your kids free doesn't have to mean completely severing the ties that bind. Most camps post [hundreds of digital photos](#) of campers each day, prompting many a lovelorn mom to sit by her computer all day clicking "refresh." Many camps allow email, and a new service even [lets parents forward recent tweets](#) from their kids' favorite Twitter personalities.

Thompson intended to write a book about all sorts of away-from-home experiences, but he zeroed in on the "magic of camp" after deciding that it's where most kids first battle homesickness only to emerge triumphantly independent. Here, Thompson talks about how a couple hundred pages about summer camp ended up as a treatise on parenting.

Healthland: Why did you write this book?

Thompson: You're so intertwined with your parents psychologically because of the prolonged dependence of the human child. We're made that way. But if you want to know who you are, it's helpful to get away from them.

I heard in a school consulting trip that there are more and more parents frightened by the school overnight trip. If they let their child go, they want 40 minutes with the 5th-grade teacher to hand over the inhaler, which the child never uses, and the bag of vitamins. Then I began talking to camp directors. They don't allow cell phones at camp, but they said they're getting kids who come with two cells — one to turn in and one as a back-up. Parents are saying, I want you to go to camp and have a camp experience, but I want you to be in constant touch with me.

That's what camp pictures are all about, right?

The camps are putting up pictures in an attempt to allay your anxiety and appease your need to know. You can look at them but know this: seeing pictures of your child online adds absolutely no value to your child's camp experience. It's 100% for the parents. One camp director told me about a boy whose mother said, When you see a photographer taking pictures of kids, jump in the picture and hold up two fingers if you're alright and three if you're not.

Is the concept behind camps posting pictures detrimental to the camp experience?

The photos encourage a delusion, that you can actually follow your child's camp journey. You're not supposed to be following your child's camp journey. You can't have it both ways. Parents who want the physical experience but then want in some way to temper or modify the psychological experience are missing the point. There are some kids whose stress levels get so high in novel situations that they can't do camp. But for the ordinary homesick kid where it takes two or three days to get over homesickness, parents who say "call me" on their backup phone are actually doing harm.

What age is too young?

Talk about sending a 7-year-old to camp, and some parents would think it's child abuse. A lot of it is cultural and geographic. I think it depends on the temperament of the child and the away-from-home history of the parent.

Why is going to camp important?

If you are a parent who is constantly supervising and monitoring, when you send your child to camp, it throws you up against your own philosophy and habits of constant supervision and control. When you send your child to camp, you have to give that up.

So it's clear that overnight camp is good for parents. What are the benefits for kids?

The number one issue for children is ownership. The thing I heard the most in interviewing hundreds of children is you can really be yourself at camp. When you are in your parent's presence, there is always shared ownership of your life. When you're playing soccer, you have the experience of playing soccer and thinking about what your parents think of your playing. The thing kids say they like least about playing sports is driving home with their parents and debriefing the game. Did my daughter want to hear my recap of her games? Did my daughter want to hear my thoughts of her friends? When you go to camp, your parents aren't there and you own everything that happens to you.