

From - <http://www.ourkids.net/camp/kidsickness.php>

Kidsickness: the silent epidemic

The source of parents' anxieties — the prospect of their children having to fend for themselves — is also, ironically, the wellspring for camp's greatest gifts to children: resilience, confidence, and maturity

Sending your child to camp provides them with the gift of independence and confidence. Beginning at a young age, they can grow and flourish in a summer camp environment. That is, if parents are willing to put aside their worries and concerns and take that step to set them free.

For many parents, it's not as easy as it sounds. Forget homesickness. The bigger struggle is with kidsickness, which refers to emotions parents feel when they are separated from their child for the first time for an extended period.

In the last 15 years or so, camp leaders and family counsellors have noticed an increase in parents struggling with letting their children go. This phenomenon is likely due to the more involved style of parenting commonly referred to as 'helicopter parenting.'

(Helicopter-parenting commentator Lenore Skenazy writes humourously on the topic.) Scott Creed, founder and executive director of Camp Muskoka, says when parents have the tragedies of the world on their TV and in the news daily, it causes them to be overly protective and worry about their child's safety.

"It's having that significant person in your life that you're used to seeing every day, knowing they aren't going to be there," he says. "The next thing is to think about all the stuff that could happen when they aren't on your watch."

Without question, Creed says, some parents will not send their kids to camp because they themselves are not ready, "especially if it's the first born or an at-home parent who has spent every day with the child."

When Karma Ingle sent her only child, Evan, to camp for the first time, it was about coming to terms with the fact parents can have a life outside of their child and not feel bad about it, knowing everything will be fine.

"It's almost wrestling with that feeling and not missing him 100 per cent of the time," she says. "I remember feeling that I hoped he was not too homesick and then I wondered what I was going to do for a week while he was gone."

While Ingle worried about Evan's food allergies, his overall safety wasn't something that had ever crossed her mind until Our Kids asked. "Even when they go on canoe trips, I'm not worried," she says. Creed adds that if parents want to minimize kidsickness, they should do in-

depth research and contact each camp directly to find out what the camp's philosophy and safety standards are, among other things.

Creed says that camper safety is about perceived risk, and a provincial camp association accreditation can go a long way to help parents feel better about their child's safety. If a camp doesn't have association accreditation, Creed says the safety policy should be equal to, if not more stringent, than what the association offers. "You can't find a better environment where your child can be challenged, your child can grow in a secure, safe environment and can get on stage and do a song and a skit and everyone is going to clap and cheer them on."

Finding the right camp for your child is important to a successful camp experience, says Creed. Parents need to take the time to interview the camps to make sure the philosophies and practices of the camp coincide with the family's dynamic.

There is a natural cycle with camper families. Creed sees reluctant kids and parents who contact the camp every day to check on their first-time camper. Parents show up hours early for family day, nervous their child had a bad time—only to find they didn't.

"Camp is for parents too," says Creed. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder. It's a piece of family psychology that is incredibly healthy that not enough people do. It helps strengthen the entire family: the couple re-ignites and the kids have the time of their life and everyone comes back happy."

Case study: the Baroloni family

A few years ago, Stephen Bartoloni was a camp-parent novice. As a child of immigrants, he had never been to camp himself; to go would have been outside his family's cultural traditions. But his only child, eight-year-old Olivia, had a passion for horses and wanted to go to a sleepover riding camp.

Stephen wanted to give his daughter the quintessential Canadian experience he never had himself, but it wasn't easy. He had to work through the same concerns of many first-time, and potential, camp parents.

*"I was worried about safety and whether my child would be well taken care of. But meeting the **camp operators inspired confidence** in my wife and me that my daughter would be safe there. The people who are involved in camp, like schools—they're trained professionals. They know what they're doing. **They know how to keep kids challenged** and offer them a safe learning experience."*

Olivia's parents visited the riding camp their daughter wanted to attend. The professionalism of the camp operators impressed them, and they felt they would be entrusting their daughter to caring, responsible and qualified adults. It was clear the camp carefully handpicked its counsellors and they were satisfied the staff were well trained in their areas of instruction. They found confidence in the camp operators' obvious dedication to the camp experience and their enthusiasm for sharing it with young campers.

*"Parents need to go and see a camp for themselves and ask a lot of questions. I was particularly interested in how staff was hired. I also looked carefully as we toured the cabins. I figured if the **small details were handled with care**, then chances are the big things would be handled well."*

Stephen said his own parents' fears about sending him to camp motivated him to try and overcome his own insecurities. As a child, he felt he was missing out on a worthwhile experience and he didn't want to deny his daughter that chance.

*"My parents were very nervous to send their kid outside, let alone camp. I wanted my daughter to have the camp experience. I thought it would **build self-confidence and independence**."*

Olivia had a wonderful time that first year and is now a veteran camper, staying for a month at a time. She has had four summers of adventures, gaining new skills, evolving socially and collecting memories, her father says. One summer, she had six cabin mates from all over the world—including Italy, Denmark and Mexico. Camp has given her experiences beyond what she would have gained in her protected urban home and school environment.

*"She **learned to make new friends** and became more social. She gained confidence. Knowing how to get along with people and being flexible are very important for future success."*

Just as Olivia gained from forging new relationships at camp and developing a sense of personal mastery, Stephen benefited from letting her go. As much as he cherishes family time with his child, he finds the weeks of separation strengthen their relationship.

While Olivia gains a sense of competence in navigating the nurturing environment of camp without her parents, Stephen gains perspective: sometimes being a caring parent means allowing children to discover and learn without you always at their heels to catch them.

*"Being away from parents can be very valuable to a child. **It's good for the parent, too, to let go a bit.**"*

If homesickness strikes....
How camps and campers deal with homesickness

A question frequently asked by new camp parents is, "What if my child is homesick?" The good news is that the majority of new campers never experience homesickness. They are too busy having fun, meeting new friends and trying new activities to even think about home. Some may experience a few tears settling in during the first couple of days but prolonged homesickness is rare. Children are more adaptable, capable and resilient than we sometimes expect.

Unless your child raises the issue, don't mention it. Well-meaning parents, trying to prepare their child for the possibility of homesickness, may create a problem where none exists. The child who has been prompted to anticipate homesickness may think she is homesick if confronted with an unrelated problem such as an unfamiliar food or frustration mastering a new skill.

However, if your child introduces the subject, reassure them that it is normal to miss home for a brief period, but you are confident they will be fine. Remind them that they will not be alone; the counsellor will be there and is trained to help. Reassure them that at camp there are so many new and exciting things to do the time will fly by and they'll probably not want to leave!

For your own peace of mind, ask the director how the camp deals with homesickness. Camps know how to welcome and integrate new campers successfully. Counsellors are expected to be particularly available and observant during the first forty-eight hours. A thorough orientation, which allows the new camper to become familiar and comfortable with the campsite, helps prevent homesickness.

Upon arrival, the counsellors tour the property with their group. If the counsellor does not sleep in the campers' cabin, they will show the campers where the staff cabin is located nearby. They help them to unpack and set up their own space. Gradually they explain the routines and general safety rules. They introduce the campers to one another and help them to learn their cabin mates' names. They spend a lot of time with their campers.

Counsellors know that campers are most susceptible to homesickness at mealtime and bedtime, times when parents are normally present. They know that the best medicine is to keep their camper busy, urge them to cope with one day at a time and reassure them that others have experienced what they are feeling, but they soon recovered. A plan goes into action to keep the homesick camper busy all the time. They supply a game or quiet activity to play during rest period. They may ask a cabin mate to be a buddy to play tetherball or a card game at free time. Often they have a special activity ready for the whole cabin to enjoy.

They will make the director and the rest of the staff aware of the situation so that the entire staff can be supportive and encouraging. All counsellors will be patient and sympathetic; many will be empathetic because they have been there themselves!