



# French Woods

## Festival of the Performing Arts

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Dear First Time Parent,

We send this letter out of concern for the welfare of your child. Each year, out of misguided love, one or two parents take actions that in the end are most damaging to their child. In order to help these parents avoid putting their children in harms way we have enclosed the following article. It was taken from a review of essays on child development:

### **How to Help Your Child Have a Great Time at Camp**

*Bruce Muchnick, EdD*

Summer at camp is more than just a vacation. At camp, kids learn to appreciate the outdoors, experience the companionship of other children and young adults working as counselors, learn skills that enhance self-reliance, cooperation with others and a sense of life larger than one's self. Hopefully, the acquisition and refinement of such skills will contribute in positive and significant ways to the child's adjustment and will carry over into his/her adult years.

Camp makes it easy for kids to have fun, relax and experience the spontaneous joys of childhood. A summer at camp is often perceived by; children, parents, community leaders, clergy and social service agencies as a respite from the strains of everyday family life and the pressures and tensions of school.

### **To help your child have a successful time at camp this summer...**

Think of camp as a learning experience. Sending your children to camp offers a wonderful opportunity for both you and your children to practice "letting go" -- an experience that can contribute to the development of healthy independence.

Don't buy a whole new wardrobe. Camp is more rugged than life at home. A child doesn't need new clothes... and having well-worn clothes and familiar possessions will help ease the transition. This is especially important for first-time campers.

Listen to and talk about concerns. As the first day of camp nears, some children understandably experience uneasiness about going off to camp. Rather than acting on what you believe his feelings to be, ask good questions such as: "We've been busy packing your gear. What are your thoughts about your program?" Communicate your confidence in his ability to handle being away from home and remind him about "small victories," successes he has experienced in other situations.

Have realistic expectations. Camp, like the rest of life, has high points and low ones. Not every moment will be filled with wonder and excitement. At times, your child will feel great while at other times he may feel unhappy or bored.

Solution: Try to maintain within yourself -- and encourage within your child -- a reasonable and realistic view of camp by mentioning "ups and downs." Opportunities for problem solving, negotiating, developing greater self-awareness and increased sensitivity to the needs of others can help your child cope with successes and failures in everyday life. Resist sending your child off to camp feeling pressured to succeed. Just relax and have fun.

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## When you child is at camp...

Observe camp policy about phone calls. Many camps, for instance, discourage phone calls during the first 10 days. It often takes kids a week and a half or so to adjust to being away from home. A call from home might disrupt the settling-in process. Furthermore, it is difficult to figure out how a child is adjusting to camp during a long-distance phone conversation.

Communicate in writing. Summer camp offers kids and parents the chance to develop a rarely practiced skill -- letter writing. Write as often as you want. Keep in mind that this is your child's connection to home and family. Email is wonderful and quick. Your letters should be upbeat. It's fine to write that you miss your child, but don't include things like "The house is so quiet without you" or "your dog misses you."

Better: Ask specific questions in your letters about your child's activities... bunk life... friends, etc. This will help him organize his letters home.

Packages are appreciated every now and then. But don't send food -- it's disruptive if some kids in the cabin receive food packages and others receive nothing. Receiving food packages is contrary to camp policy. If your child asks you to sneak food packages, don't. Even if you think the rule is silly, breaking a camp rule might interfere with your child's sense of right and wrong.

Better: Send postcards, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, comics, game books, puzzles and other items that can be shared with friends.

Don't make major changes at home. This is not the time to reconfigure your marital relationship, move to a new neighborhood, sanitize or gut and redecorate your child's room or get rid of his fossilized frog collection. Help your child cope at camp. Most kids need a few days to adjust to life at camp and being away from home. During this time, kids miss their parents, pets, friends and familiar surroundings. Most kids cope with these concerns and -- with the help of camp staff -- build support systems. If your child's letters contain urgent pleas for you to bring him home, resist the temptation to rush to camp. Avoid making deals, such as "Give camp one more week, if you're still unhappy, we'll bring you home." This is sure disaster.

Better: Support your child's efforts to work out problems with the help of the director and the camp's staff.

Communicate your love and confidence in your child's ability to work through problems. Remind him, if necessary, that he has made a commitment for the summer. Overcoming a longing for home, dealing with upsets in the cabin and learning to care for oneself are important challenges to be faced at camp.

Important: Talk candidly with the camp director. Allow the director and staff an opportunity to apply their expertise in helping kids adapt to the routines of camp life. Listen to the advice of the camp director, remember he's been doing this for many years and has been very successful. Most adjustment difficulties can be worked through. Later, your child will thank you for the encouragement to stay.

Keep in mind that some kids feel guilty when an experience like camp does not work out for them. They may feel they have let their parents down, or that they are not up to leaving home. Failure will remain with a child for years.

*Bottom Line/Personal interviewed Bruce Muchnick, EdD, a licensed psychologist in private practice, Glenside, Pennsylvania 19038. Dr. Muchnick advises camp owners, directors, camping professionals and parents throughout the year and works intensively with camp communities during the summer. He is the founder and director of Summer Camp Resources, a group of professionals who provide organizational and mental-health services to camp communities.*

It is my hope that you found this letter informative and it has created some discussion. Please do not hesitate to call at any time. Remember it is our goal to provide your child with a positive experience that they will never forget.

See you this summer,

*Ron, Isaac, and Enid*

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