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Is Your Little Camper Really Ready?

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK

WHEN ASKED HOW TO SPELL HIS NAME, ROBERT SOMERS JOKES THAT, YES, IT WOULD BE PERFECT IF HIS LAST NAME WAS SPELLED "S-U-M-M-E-R-S."

The executive director of Camp Chanco in Surry, Virginia is a big fan of summer: Warm days, bright sunshine and lots of time to explore nature make him happy.

In fact, he grew up going to camp – right at Camp Chanco – and has seen child after child grow by attending sleep-away camp.

"People think about the outdoor activities and how fun it is to try the ropes course and the waterfront activities at camp," he said, "but what I'm really talking about is the opportunity for the children to learn about working together as a team and problem-solve. I've heard from corporations that their best employees are often those people

who attended camp."

However, Somers emphasizes, that does not mean that camp is right for every child.

Parents are wise to start by showing Little Jimmy or Jenny exactly what camp is all about. A visit to the camp they're considering – while it's in session – is a good start. If that's not possible, a

thorough look at the camp's web site can be helpful, as well as a look at a camp DVD.

"This gives the child a clear visual of what he would be experiencing," says Somers, who has a degree in recreational therapy and experience in counseling and psychology. "If the child's not comfortable after watching the DVD, don't push camp."

Mike Schneider, executive director at Camp Louise and Camp Airy in Cascade and Thurmont, Maryland, agrees that parents should follow their child's lead.

"When the camper says 'I want to go to sleep-away camp,' that's a clear sign that things should be OK," says Schneider. "If it's the parents' idea, you can't spring it on the child by saying 'by the way, you're going to camp this summer.' You have to involve the child."

A good thing for parents to consider, says Schneider, is how much maturity the child shows in taking care of himself.

"Will he change his underwear and brush his teeth without being reminded?" he asks. "Of course, a counselor will be at camp to help with those things, but it's a sign that the child is ready for an extended stay away if he'll do them on his own at home first."

Schneider also recommends considering how well a child does with regular sleepovers. If he or she isn't comfortable with sleeping at a friend's or a grandparent's, parents might first want to "practice" for camp by organizing more sleepovers.

"If a child gets used to sleepovers and doesn't fret at all, she might then be ready

It's also important to think about how well your child does in everyday social settings, advises Jack Shitama, director of Camp Pecometh in Centreville, Maryland.

for camp," Somers says.

It's also important to think about how well your child does in everyday social settings, advises Jack Shitama, director of Camp Pecometh in Centreville, Maryland.

"It's less about how old your child is and more about how comfortable she is in a social setting," Shitama says. "Ask yourself if she likes to play in groups or if she'd rather stay near Mom."

A child who clings to her parents in most circumstances probably isn't ready, but some other children might be "borderline." They like the idea of camp, know what it's all about, can take care of basic hygiene needs on their own, joyfully join new groups of children and look forward to sleepovers – but still feel a little anxious about being away from Mom and Dad for more than a night.

These are the children who should consider a shorter camp program. Shitama's Camp Pecometh offers three-day and two-night camps for first and second graders. They also have one-week programs, as do Camp Louise, Camp Airy

and Camp Chanco. Sometimes six nights is easier for the first year of sleep-away camp than the 28 nights that come with a four-week program.

Shitama also recommends that campers come with a friend the first time they attend camp. The two children may not be together all the time, but "knowing" someone at camp provides a degree of comfort.

The philosophy at Camp Chanco is to wait until children are 8 years old for camp – and then to attend for only a week and to still consider coming with a friend.

"Mom" might be tempted to be that friend, and that's understandable. All of the camp directors interviewed for this story said that it's often the mother who is much more anxious about sleepover camp than the child. It's important, they said, that she not share her concerns with her child. Instead, Mom should talk about how much fun the child will have and how many new friends she'll make.

If Mom can't calm her fears or Jimmy or Jenny isn't yet showing the maturity for camp, the idea doesn't have to be put on hold completely. Camp Chanco, and many other organizations, offers camps for the entire family.

"Children who need lots of supervision and aren't independent really are best with their parents," says Chano director Somers, "and that's OK. Almost everyone likes to be a pioneer or an Indian. It's something most Americans relate to, and we have something for families to experience together." @

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