

Kids Need to Be Away From Home



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When I talk to residential camp directors around the country today, they tell me that many parents are struggling with the idea of sending children away for four-week or six-week sessions. "It's just too long," they say. Parents are keeping their children near them, and trying shorter skills-based experiences, perhaps a one-week computer "camp," followed by a one-week tennis "camp."

In my opinion, these aren't really camps, not in a psychological sense. For me, camp is about character, community and a prolonged period of independence.

Parents assume that their presence always adds value to a child's growth. I disagree. I think parents can sometimes seriously impede their children's development.

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As a parent there are many things you cannot do for your children. You cannot give your child confidence, you cannot pick or manage his or her friendships, you cannot always be his or her advocate/agent/manager/coach. Most parents cannot get their children to turn off electronics, especially in the summer, and most important, parents have a hard time urging their children to take psychological risks.

Camps do all of these things brilliantly. Young adult counselors present developmental challenges to which younger children rise. Living in a cabin 24/7 with kids you like and kids you hate builds self-control and empathy. Helping carry someone else's backpack on a hike, making a fire and cooking together, cleaning pots in the lake, trying new foods and overcoming homesickness...well, that's independence. And true independence is something your parents cannot give you. You have to live it on your own.