

Is your child ready for over-night camp?

Going to camp can offer your child a wealth of enriching experiences, whether it's improving soccer skills, learning to ride a horse or just seeing a different part of the state.

But how do you know if your child is ready for the experience of being away from you? Will they be able to handle the inevitable homesickness, or will you end up making an unexpected trip to retrieve an inconsolable child?

Some common-sense evaluation will help you decide.

"The first thing is have they had an overnight stay somewhere else," said Dr. Robert J. Ancona, chief of the Department of Pediatrics at St. Joseph Medical Center. "Have they spent time overnight at a friend's house or at the neighbors?" Even staying at a relative's house is helpful preparation, but it's better if the child has spent the night somewhere that is a little less familiar to them, and with other children. You do not want camp to be their first overnight experience; it's better to start with a smaller step.

"You want to know how they do in groups," Dr. Ancona said. "You want to gauge your kid's response - some kids are shy."

Take note of how responsible your child is - when you drop them off at practice, do they return with both their cleats and their shoes? Do they bring home their lunch box?

Asks Dr. Ancona: "Is your child able to take care of themselves in some way, shape or form?" He points out that supervision at camp may be less than at home, or even at the home of friends.

Can your child follow instructions? Will they be able to get themselves together at camp? Parents also should research the camp to find out what the expectations are, and then evaluate - honestly - if their child will be able to meet them.

Go through a dry run with your child. Say, “At camp you’re going to have to do these things,” and get a sense of how your child feels about it.

A few years ago, a shyer girl and a more outgoing girl, both of whom attended Catholic elementary schools and played lacrosse together in the local rec council, went to a sleepover lacrosse camp at a local college. They were asked to run from their dorm to the practice field. The shyer child, who loved to run, enjoyed the camp despite being homesick at night, while the more outgoing child dreaded the running but enjoyed the evening socializing.

The major factor in the decision is your child’s reaction to the idea.

“See what the child thinks about it,” Dr. Ancona said, adding that overnight camp is not a necessary experience. “If the child is negative about it – don’t push it.”

If a child is showing significant apprehension, that should be a red flag for parents that the child is just not ready.

“If they don’t do well overnight, why is that true?” Dr. Ancona said. “Do they have separation anxiety? Social anxiety? Do they not do well in big groups?”

If your family is culturally different, such as following a kosher diet or wearing different dress, that might make camp a more difficult experience. After all, in the local rec council, there might be one or two other children from the same culture, and the teammates are used to it. But at camp, it might be the first time other children encounter a child from your culture.

And though a child is enthusiastic about a sport or activity, that doesn’t necessarily mean they want to do it for a week in a strange place with children they’ve never met before.

“Even if a kid really likes soccer, that doesn’t mean they’re ready for an overnight,” Dr. Ancona said. “Parents need to be in touch with their kids.”