

Bruce Muchnick, Ed.D.

Letting Go

Soon, parents will load their cars, vans, and SUVs with their children's trunks, duffel bags and "stuff" and either drive to camp or gather at shopping malls, airports, church and synagogue parking lots to send their children off to camp by coach busses and planes while other parents will be looking for the arrival of day camp busses in their neighborhoods.

The children of these parents will be among the millions of kids who fill thousands of day and overnight camps of many different varieties and sponsorships for either a short-term encampment or for a full season.

Looking around, we would probably sense the mounting anticipation, the palpably felt excitement in the air. We would doubtlessly witness innumerable hugs, kisses, hear words of encouragement, and, perhaps, see some tears. There may be a shared but largely unspoken awareness that this departure from home will somehow be different from other experiences in parenting or in being a child. This act, this process of separating can have profound meaning in the lives of children and their parents.

As a practicing psychologist (here in the office and at camp), I deeply respect the profound impact that summer camp can have on children's development. One very significant contribution is that camp can provide the opportunity for children (and their parents) to practice for varying lengths of time "letting go" in a unique setting that supports and encourages this very important process.

Life can be viewed as an unquantifiable series of letting go and coming together experiences. This process begins at birth when the umbilical cord is clamped and cut (letting go) and the newborn infant is placed in the waiting arms of his/her parents (coming together). Letting go/coming together experiences continue with naps, time alone in the crib, a few hours with a baby sitter while the parents have a break,

visits with grandparents. Opportunities for letting go/coming together experiences seem to accelerate when kids join play groups or participate in day care programs, attend nursery school, elementary school, engage in overnight visits with friends or relatives, leap into middle school, camp, high school, college and . . . into adulthood. Letting go is inevitable, healthy, and desirable. This process provides children with opportunities to develop autonomy and a stronger, healthy sense of self.

What awaits kids at camp is the opportunity to relax, have fun, let their creative juices flow and experience the spontaneous joys of childhood. Children, parents, community leaders, clergy, and social service agencies often perceive a summer at camp as a respite from the strains of everyday family life and the pressures and tensions of school. Away from the inevitable pressures and distractions of life at home, aptly described by David Elkind in *The Hurried Child* and *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, children have the opportunity to unburden themselves and renew their sense of being kids.

At camp, children can learn to enjoy the outdoors, develop a greater appreciation for the environment, experience the companionship of other children, and learn skills that enhance competence, self-confidence, self-reliance, the ability to cooperate with others, and, hopefully, a greater awareness of life that is larger than one's self. Campers can obtain guidance in problem solving from young adults and grownups working as counselors, as well as specialists and support



staff. Staffers, in turn, have opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of children and their needs, expand interpersonal skills to enhance their work with children, with one another, and with management in a setting that also supports their own personal growth.

Allowing a child to go off to camp also provides parents with opportunities to take better care of themselves, to "sleep with both eyes closed," to fill time not spent carpooling, reviewing homework, or running so many errands with more time for engaging in their own interests, to do some of the things parents are not able to do when the kids are around. This increases the likelihood that when children return from camp at the end of the day or at the end of the summer, parents will be refreshed, available, and accessible again. ■

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