

Guest Blogger Jenny: Sleep Away Camp: A Transformative Experience

Description

My child is no stranger to sleep away camp. By the tender age of seven, she was asking to go away (I said no; she couldn't even brush her own hair then, so there was no way she was going away for two or more weeks). When she was eight, I gave in and sent her to the camp my sister, step-sister, and myself attended.

She did not love it. She said the kids were mean and the counselors unfeeling. Still, she gave it another try, returning at age nine for yet another session. She reached the same conclusions. After that, she was hesitant to go again.

But I knew that camp was good for her. Rather than spend the entire summer in smoggy L.A., going to day camps she didn't much like, she could be in a beautiful, rural environment learning new skills. Besides, I didn't want her to give up. It wasn't camp that was the problem, it was finding the right camp. Her father sent away for info on camps in, of all places, Maine. And she found one she liked.

Three and a half weeks away on a lake in Maine. Formidable stuff for a kid who claimed to not like sleep away camp. I have to say, it looked amazing. All girls. There was an endless schedule of activities like riding, sailing, gymnastics, and tons of art stuff. There were plays and beach days and clambakes. After viewing the DVD, I wanted to go there, too.

Anna flew out of LAX with a positive attitude, and it served her well. I tracked the camp's activities every day through its website, checking the photos for signs of her. She was happy and smiling in most of the shots. When I spoke to her for one of our two phone calls, on her birthday, she practically blew me off in an attempt to get back to her party (I was not upset by this; it's a good sign when your kid is at camp and isn't interested in speaking to you because there's too much fun stuff going on. This is what you pay for). Her letters were laughably short and upbeat.

The time kind of dragged on for me. Almost a month without your child is a bit rough. I started to feel like part of me had been amputated. But hey, that's my problem. My job as a parent is to let my child have new experiences, and learn to function without me.

Upon her homecoming, I fully expected her to be totally obnoxious. After all, sheâ€™d just spent almost a month with pubescent girls, getting as teenaged silly as possible. Surely, sheâ€™d be mouthy, sulky and difficult.

Nope. Just the opposite. She came back more mature. Not to mention helpful. Sleep away camp, you see, really is a character builder. It used to be that we went away to escape our parents and enjoy some freedom from the tyranny of chores and nagging. But kids donâ€™t really have that relationship with their families anymore. Many of our kids go to private schools that offer tons of activities and endless amusement. Parents tend to want to be their kidsâ€™ friend rather than authority figure. And chores? Not so much.

So camp has become the place where kids are given housework to do, group responsibilities to fulfill, and self-reliance is paramount. Sure, theyâ€™re watched over, but theyâ€™re also expected to tow absolute lines. Anna came back with a new attitude of cooperation. She cooked her own oatmeal and offered to walk the dog (and took pride in the fact that he behaved so well for her). Camp gave her a sense of being a part of a larger unit, and she seems to have transferred that to our own tiny family unit. And my worries of Miley Cyrus mouth? Totally unfounded. If anything, Anna acts even more like the worldâ€™s smallest 30 year old.

Jenny Heitz has worked as a staff writer for Coast Weekly in Carmel, freelanced in the South Bay, and then switched to advertising copywriting. Her daughter started 4th grade at Mirman School this year. She previously attended 3rd St. Elementary School. Jenny has been published recently in the Daily News and on Mamapedia, The Well Mom, Sane Moms, Hybrid Mom, The Culture Mom and A Child Grows In Brooklyn. She now writes about gift ideas and products on her blog, [Find A Toad](#).

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