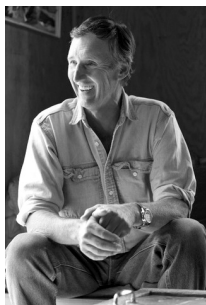


Get the most out of your summer camp investment

BY JIM WILTENS



**DEER
CROSSING**



High Sierra Summer Camp
SINCE 1983

“**O**ur daughter returned from camp feeling more confident, inspired, and excited than we have seen in a long time. Now that she is home, we want to maintain the positive energy she picked up at camp. How can we help maintain this positive momentum?”

Camp may be over, but the benefits don't have to stop at the end of the summer. There are five things parents can do to maintain the positive momentum started at camp.

1. Reinforce success

When children return home, draw out their success stories. If a child performed at campfire, helped another camper overcome homesickness, learned to handle a horse, or passed a swim test, he has something to be proud of. Growth in an independent living situation gives a child a sense of resourcefulness and self-reliance. “Some of us in the guitar class made up a funny song about the counselors. At campfire, we performed for the whole camp. I thought I might mess up but the director said it was great. Everyone laughed a lot.” Be willing to listen to stories several times. Repetition reinforces the child's self-image.

- Use the stories about your child's successes at camp at a later time to bolster her self-confidence back home. “Remember when you told me about the night walk at camp? No flashlight. A dark forest. You were really scared. You thought a bear was going to eat you. The next day, it didn't seem so scary. You were scared, but you learned to handle it. Just like I know you will be able to handle it now.”
- A month after camp, take out the letters sent home. This rekindles a child's desire to talk about their experiences. Kids enjoy hearing what they wrote and often respond with more about the story.
- If your child took photos, invest in a photo album. A photo album makes it easy for your child to show pictures to relatives and friends after camp. Looking at a photo album reinforces a child's memory of being self-reliant. “This is

when we went camping. Three miles sounded pretty easy. But we had to carry our food, clothing, and sleeping bag. It was hard for some of the kids. On the second day, I offered to carry more stuff. My counselor said I was a tough backpacker.”

- Frame a photo for your child's wall that shows a positive event at camp such as riding a horse, performing in a play, catching a fish, camping out. These are major events for a child and help jog a child's success memory. Success breeds success.

Sometimes a child's success may not be apparent to a parent. For example, just before leaving camp, some kids put on their grubbier clothes for the trip home. Why? It's a badge of honor. It says ‘I survived on my own’. Similarly, some campers exaggerate the dangers or difficulties of camp to bolster their sense of independence. Sometimes parents need to take what campers say with a grain of salt. The grubby clothing and stories of adversity are ways of saying I can handle it. Parents who go ballistic over a dirty teeshirt or respond to stories with “That's terrible” are missing the message. Kids are looking for recognition of their ability to deal with the situation.

2. Continue competence development

If your child enjoyed music, sports, martial arts, drama, art, crafts, or being in nature, find a way for them to continue their development. Camp plants seeds that can be nourished the rest of the year.

In some families, children feel competitive with siblings or even parents. At camp, the chance to learn something outside the family domain may give a sense of competency. Be willing to encourage your child's newfound activity. “We are a horse family and expected Katie to follow along with our interests. I think she's always felt inferior to her sister who has won many riding awards. When Katie returned from camp, she was excited about windsurfing. We rented a windsurfer at a local lake. We were impressed

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with her ability and she was obviously pleased when she had a chance to teach us some of what she had learned.”

3. Keep relationships alive

Relationship skills are one of the most important skills learned in camp. Keep relationships alive. Attend camp reunions, and if kids have made friends who live nearby, plan a get-together. Remember that friendships formed at camp are often active. Plan a get-together that includes an activity like attending a baseball game, visiting the beach, or going on a bike ride.

Many camps hire foreign staff who appreciate a place to stay after camp. If your child bonds with a counselor, you might offer that counselor a place to stay for several days after camp. Often the counselor will have nice things to say about the child, which bolsters the child's self-image. A counselor who lives locally may be invited over for dinner.

4. Make chores social

“After camp, Mary was a lot more helpful around the house—for about two weeks—then she drifted back to her old behavior.” Why will kids shovel horse manure at camp, but they won't take out the garbage at home? At camp, chores have three key characteristics: (1) they are expected at the outset, (2) there is a set schedule, and (3) camp chores are a social affair. If you want the work ethic initiated at camp to stick at home, you need to copy the pattern. Set aside a regular time period when chores are expected to be done. When possible, create family teams to do chores: washing dishes, sorting laundry, doing yard work, washing the car, cleaning the garage. Doing chores socially offers a time to talk and tasks seem to go faster with company. Set up this pattern within several days of your children returning from camp while they are still used to the routine.

Here's a simple chore to start the process on a child's return home. When opening the camp trunk or laundry bag, why should you have all the clean-up fun? Share the chore of cleaning up after camp. It is also a chance to hear about a camper's adventures. It's amazing how a stain or ripped pants can jog the memory.

5. Provide new opportunities

Camp has immersed your child in new experiences: new friends, new activities, a unique living situation, and a new environment. Successfully maneuvering in this new world is a great feeling. “When we came to camp to pick up Chris, he looked a foot taller.” You want to build on that extra “foot.” What you want to build is a sense of confidence for handling new situations. Do this by maintaining the momentum started at camp. In the three months after returning from camp, plan three new experiences. Take the family to a new museum, planetarium, or aquarium. See a play at a local theater. Join a community service club. Volunteer in a soup kitchen. Look at the calendar of events in local newspapers or magazines to get ideas, and ask for your child's input. What you are doing is extending the feeling of being able to deal with change from camp back to home. Being able to deal with change is a critical skill in our rapidly-changing world.

If you like the results you see in the first year of camp, sign up early for next year. An early sign-up gives your child something to look forward to. It encourages friends to contact each other to arrange to be in the same session. The growth benefits from the second year of camp are often more impressive than the first year, as kids are now over the jitters, know more what to expect, and feel more confident.

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