

# When is the right time for overnight camp?

BY JIM WILTENS



## DEER CROSSING



High Sierra Summer Camp  
SINCE 1983

**K**atie Roberts couldn't decide whether to send her son to summer school or summer camp. "After all," said Katie, "he's just thirteen and has a number of years where he could still attend camp." She asked my opinion, as a camp director and friend. I replied, "Your son will get the biggest benefits of an overnight camp between the ages of 10 and 13, the 'tween' years. Changes occurring in the tweens magnify the impact of the summer camp experience, turning it into a concentrated learning experience."

In the tween years, an overnight camp contributes independence, mentors, tolerance of diversity, and enhanced resiliency.

### **Camp provides supervised independence**

During the tween years, mental and physical changes trigger a need for independence from the family. Summer camp provides a natural outlet for this independence. Camp is one of the few experiences in our society where children live away from the home environment for weeks at a time. Summer camp expands a child's boundaries and builds their resiliency, while simultaneously providing the supervision a child needs.

This growing independence makes some parents uncomfortable. Parents often comment, "My child is ready for camp, but I'm not." Keep in mind that this transition is natural. Bottling it up only causes more pressure. By anticipating independence, parents can direct energy in a positive direction before it becomes explosive. Camp is one way to direct that energy so that the parent-child relationship matures with fewer struggles.

A signal that tweens are entering their independent phase is a tendency towards more arguments. It is a phase similar to the period when a younger child sings SpongeBob's theme song incessantly. In the tween years, children discover logic and want to debate everything. These debates are a child's way of developing reasoning ability, but parents see it more as a test of patience. Summer camp is a vacation for both tweens and parents who need a respite

from the battering ram of juvenile logic. At camp, kids get a perspective of living partly on their own. Parents often comment that this perspective translates into more appreciation for Mom and Dad when a camper returns home.

### **Camp offers role models**

The tween years are also a time when fantasy heroes like Captain America are set aside for champions of flesh and blood. Posters of super-athletes, musicians, and actors adorn bedroom walls. Until now, parents were the ultimate power in a child's life. Now the focus shifts, and tweens look for identity and power outside the family. While the idealized poster hero is influential, closeness to a mentor has more impact. Tweens are constructing a personality from sources other than the family, and it is important they be around respected people they can relate to. Counselors and instructors at camp can act as positive role models. Children may pick up on the kindness of a favorite counselor or aspire to the skills of an expert instructor. The intensity of the 24-hour living arrangement further magnifies the impact a mentor has on a tween.

### **Camp diversity expands viewpoints**

In the tween years, children become less ego-centric. These are the years when children begin to see things from another viewpoint. Children raised in a homogenous environment may experience a hardening of the viewpoint. If all your friends are the same as you are, differences are not tolerated as easily. Making friends with campers from different ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds helps tweens learn to deal with diversity. Many camps hire international staff who further expand a camper's viewpoint. Learning to appreciate and respect other people's viewpoints nurtures a developing social conscience.

### **Camp assists image development**

A child who starts camp in the tween years can attend camp for several summers before her

Originally published in  
Bay Area Parent  
(revised)

Photo by Jaime Emery

When is the right time for overnight camp?

fourteenth birthday. This gives her several years to develop skill in activities available at camp. By the time the early-camp-starter is nearing fourteen, she is proficient in camp programs like riding, windsurfing, music, or drama. The timing is ideal. At fourteen, children experience a strong urge to feel special. Competency in previously acquired skills gives a child a sense of uniqueness, which is a major ingredient in budding self-esteem. This benefit of summer camp comes with repeated early exposure.

While an overnight summer camp can have a positive impact on children at any age, the tween years will give you the biggest return on your investment.

---

### Summer camp and college

Some children have never been away from home for prolonged periods until they leave for college. Many of them experience college culture shock. The stress of academics combined with living away from home for the first time is a blow for many freshmen. Teens who have already experienced the dormitory of summer camp for four weeks, overcome feelings of homesickness as children, and dealt with a diverse mix of people in a 24-hour living situation will experience less stress in their first critical year of college. Summer camp is a college preparatory investment.

### Is your child is ready for an overnight camp?

- Has your child spent time away from family—school science camps, sleep-overs, trips with family friends, etc.—without feeling anxious?
- Has your child been homesick and learned to deal with it?
- Is your child comfortable in the dark, or does she rely on a nightlight, call out to parents for reassurance at bedtime, or repeatedly voice fears?
- Does your child get a good night's sleep in new locations like friend's houses, outdoors, and on family vacations?
- Is your child happy eating a wide variety of foods, or does he turn his nose up at meals that don't include his favorite foods or aren't like Dad makes?
- When your child has a problem, can he express his needs to someone other than a family member in a calm manner?
- Does your child behave normally around new acquaintances, either adults or children?
- Is your child expected to follow rules and contribute to chores as a member of the family? Are any of these chores more sophisticated than taking out the garbage?
- Does your child display an independent nature and desire for self-sufficiency, such as taking the initiative to try out for a team, starting a woodworking project in the garage, or offering to work for others?
- Does your child want to go to camp?

---

Jim Wiltens owns and directs Deer Crossing Camp, a wilderness adventure summer camp for children ages 8–17 in California's High Sierra. His workshops on proactive parenting skills for parents and on leadership and resiliency skills for children are offered throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. He is a three-time winner of the national Parenting Press Association

Award for best column on child development and parenting issues in a parenting publication, and the author of *Memory Smart!* and *Camels, Skulls, and Cobras*. For more information on Deer Crossing Camp, visit [www.deercrossingcamp.com](http://www.deercrossingcamp.com). For more information on Jim Wiltens, visit [www.jimwiltens.com](http://www.jimwiltens.com).