

## **Letting Go—Parents and Camps Foster Children’s Self-Reliance**

**Marla Coleman**

I have witnessed, first-hand, the incredible journeys of children who come to recognize their own power in steering their own destinies.

*Camp is a stepping-stone to self-reliance!* It is one community in which children can learn to navigate on their own without well-intentioned parental course-plotting to avert choppy waters. As a parent, I confess to the compelling desire to negotiate smooth sailing for my own children. Yet, over the years, as a camp director, I have witnessed, first-hand, the incredible journeys of children who come to recognize their own power in steering their own destinies. Opportunities for decision-making and problem-solving at camp, which foster a culture of success, allow children to discover their strengths and their abilities to make good choices and to influence positive outcomes for themselves.

After all, coaching kids to feel capable is what camp directors do. Not quite so obvious but just as central is their proficiency to coach parents to support their children with just the right combination of back-up and encouragement. Kids learn quickly to rely upon themselves and the adults they trust at camp instead of their parents, who could be one hundred miles away or more!

Ariel, a second-year camper, casually asked me during camp, “Does my Mom still call every day?” She and Mom had fallen into a predictable pattern: Ariel would tell her mom about “what was wrong” (we know that kids tend to “save” things for their parents!), and Mom would dutifully call the camp to “fix” the problem. They were each doing their “jobs.” Carefully and slowly, with appropriate guidance, Mom came to understand that she was perpetuating a cycle that was preventing her daughter from being independent. As trust increased, she started redirecting her daughter’s pleas, encouraging her to speak with someone at camp who could more quickly and efficiently help her resolve the situation — yet still validating Ariel’s feelings.

I was gratified to answer Ariel’s query: “Actually, no,” to which Ariel quickly responded: “That’s because I stopped complaining to her!” Lessons learned for both parent and child! “Aha’s” like this happen every day at camp. How can parents and camps cooperate to help children gain just the right degree of independence?

- Many camps have a designated contact person. During the decision-making process of “which camp,” ask questions that give you an idea of the partnering and communication philosophy of the camp and learn who the primary contact person is—build rapport early. (See the sidebar: Questions to Ask the Camp Director.)
- Remember that camp directors have a reservoir of experiences to back their counsel to you. Know, too, that they have your child’s best interests at heart and the skill to guide your child towards an appropriate level of independence, self-confidence, and success.

- Keep in mind that kids often triumph over their adjustment to a new environment before their parents can accept the next stage of their development! Do not offer to rescue your child; that only confirms for him that you believe he cannot cope with something that is difficult.
- Get on board with the notion of supporting kids to solve their own problems or asking a trusted counselor for help; let her experience the real world in the camp setting, not the one that you sculpt for her during the rest of the year. Picture success!

Admittedly, it is a leap of faith to let your baby bird fly from the nest; it is the greatest gift you can bestow. The key is to build the nest in a tree that gives you a sense of security, so do your homework to find the right fit — there is a camp for every child and a feeling of comfort for every parent.

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## **Questions To Ask Camp Directors**

When you receive a camp's brochure, you will invariably have questions for the camp director. Get to know the camp director as a person through telephone conversations, correspondence, and a personal visit. Have the director describe the camp's philosophy and how the staff implements it.

### **What is the camp's philosophy and program emphasis?**

Each camp has its own method of constructing programs based on its philosophy. Does it complement your own parenting philosophy?

### **What is the camp director's background?**

American Camp Association (ACA) minimum standards recommend directors possess a bachelor's degree, have completed in-service training within the past three years, and have at least sixteen weeks of camp administrative experience before assuming the responsibilities of director.

### **What training do counselors receive?**

At a minimum, camp staff should be trained in safety regulations, emergency procedures and communication, behavior management techniques, child abuse prevention, appropriate staff and camper behavior, and specific procedures for supervision.

### **What is the counselor-to-camper ratio?**

ACA standards require different ratios for varying ages and special needs.

### **What are the ages of the counselors?**

ACA standards recommend that 80 percent or more of the counseling/program staff be at least eighteen years old. Staff must be at least sixteen years old and be at least two years older than the campers with whom they work.

**What are desired qualities in camp staff?**

The same qualities of trustworthiness and dependability sought by any employer are valued commodities in camp employees.

**What percentage of the counselors returned from last year?**

Most camps have from 40-60 percent returning staff. If the rate is lower, find out why.

**How are behavioral and disciplinary problems handled?**

This is where the director's philosophy comes through loud and clear. Positive reinforcement, assertive role modeling and a sense of fair play are generally regarded as key components of camp counseling and leadership.

**How does the camp handle special needs?**

If your child has special requirements, ask the camp director about needed provisions and facilities.

**How does the camp handle homesickness and other adjustment issues?**

Again, the camp's philosophy on helping children adjust is important. Be sure you are comfortable with the camp's guidelines on parent/child contact.

**What about references?**

This is generally one of the best ways to check a camp's reputation and service record. Directors should be happy to provide references.

**Does the American Camp Association accredit the camp?**

It is only logical that members of your family attend an ACA-accredited camp. Accreditation visitors ask the questions—300 of them—regarding essential health, safety, and program quality issues important to a camp's overall operation.

Visit [www.CampParents.org](http://www.CampParents.org), a family resource offering expert advice from camp professionals on camp selection, readiness, child and youth development, and issues of importance to families.

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