

“The single most important criteria for a young camper’s success rate is their desire to be there. If they want to be there, with help from the staff, they will make it work, and they will have an incredible experience.”

– Adam Kronick, President,
Ontario Camps Association

Don't Worry, Be Happy

It's natural for parents to have concerns about sending their child to summer camp. However, by following these expert tips, parents can put their worries to rest and help their child enjoy the experience of a lifetime

By Mary Del Ciancio



Camp can be an incredible opportunity for kids to develop independence and social skills, make lifelong friendships, and experience many new activities. It's why Laurie Jones wanted to send her six-year-old daughter Lana to overnight camp for the first time last summer. And though it was for only two nights and she was going with friends, Jones still had some concerns about the experience prior to sending her.

"It was the first time she was sleeping over somewhere that wasn't with my parents or [my husband's] parents, and she was three hours away. What if something happened? What if she wouldn't stop crying or go to bed?"

Jones is not alone. Concerns over safety and missing home are echoed by many parents of campers, especially when it's their first time. With that in mind, *Camp Pages* spoke to several summer camp directors and experts about top parental concerns, to seek their advice on the best way to alleviate these worries so that campers – and their parents – get the most out of the experience.

▶ Will my child be homesick?

Missing home tops the list of concerns that Adam Kronick hears from parents, and that has stayed consistent over his 30 years of running camps, says the president of the Ontario Camps Association and owner of Camp White Pine in Haliburton, Ont. He explains that missing home is natural, and it's important for parents to talk to their kids about it prior to sending them to camp.

"Discuss what they are going to do if they miss home, and develop some strategies," he suggests.

Writing letters and talking to their counsellors are two ways of dealing with homesickness, says Kronick. Counsellors and camp staff are there to support the campers, keep them busy and help them

connect with other campers so that they can thrive in the camp setting.

▶ Will my child be safe?

For Kronick, health and safety is another common concern amongst parents.

"Often, he explains, "parents want to know about the medical situation – is there a doctor or nurse on



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site, how far is the local hospital and what are their practices in terms of emergency procedures and safe operational practices?"

Through a camp's website, handbooks and camp staff, it's important to learn what these practices and procedures are to help alleviate any safety concerns.

Julie Gallie, a community recreation programmer with the City of Toronto, and a member of the Ontario Camps Association board of directors, often receives questions about camper-to-staff ratios and counsellor training.

"We just try to reassure them with how much we do to prepare our staff for whatever situation may arise," she explains.

▶ **Will my child make friends?**

Parents are also often concerned about whether their child will fit in. But most camps focus on offering a warm, welcoming environment where kids are accepted as part of a group.

Kronick recommends that parents find out about the camp's culture and values. Ask what they do in the cabin group to promote an atmosphere where people treat each other respectfully and where everyone is accepted as a valued member of the group. If there is bullying, find out how it's dealt with to make sure your child is happy and safe.

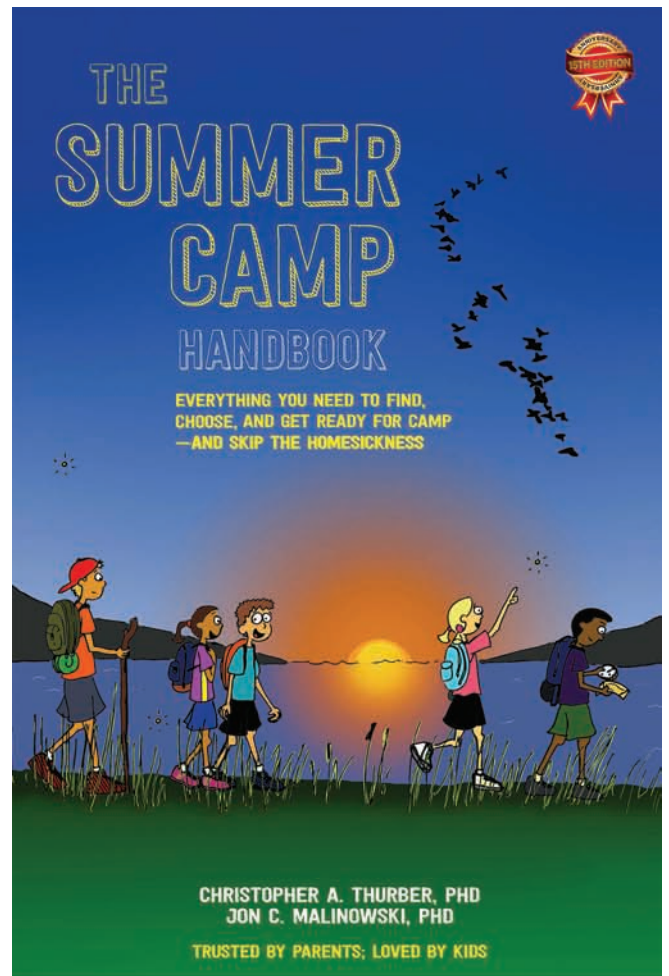
"Once a child feels accepted and feels valued and part of a group, the rest is secondary," Kronick says. "From there they'll be comfortable, they'll learn skills and try new things."

▶ **Can I let my child go?**

These days, says Drew Black, director of Camp Muskoka in Bracebridge, Ont., it's more about parents having the confidence to let their child go. Technology has made it so they know where their child is at all times. But at camp, they don't have that frequent communication.

"For parents, it's quite an adjustment not to know what





their child is doing throughout the day, other than just knowing they're at camp," says Black. "We have to talk parents through and let them know that it's a vacation for you as well as your kid. And they're going to learn independence and responsibility and grow from that experience."

▶ How can I calm my concerns?

Whatever the worry is, the best way to deal with it is through research and preparation. This starts with finding a camp that matches your values and your child's interests. Consider the camp's culture, the activities your child will be doing, and the duration of time they'll be there, to make sure it's a fit.

Once you've narrowed down the options, make a list of questions and concerns, and talk to camp directors about them. Ask what they do when children are homesick. Ask about their safety procedures. Find out about counsellor experience. Whatever your concerns are, address them with the camp director.

Kronick and Black both suggest visiting the camp and getting references from families who have sent their children to that particular camp. Gallie agrees that this will go a long way towards calming anxieties for both campers and parents.

"That alleviates a lot of concerns for parents, because now they have a visual and they can imagine where their kid is going to be, and then they can talk about it," she says.

In fact, discussing camp with kids early on is also important, as it will help prepare them for the experience. And that's exactly what Jones did with her daughter Lana. They discussed the possibility of missing home and the importance of making sure everyone in the cabin is included.

"It turns out she was fine," says Jones, adding that it was such a positive experience, she's already signed her up for next summer. "She had so much fun."

And that, after all, is what camp is all about. **CP**

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Mary Del Ciancio is a freelance writer in Toronto.

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