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What Every Parent’s Talking About

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Ask the Experts
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Q
My daughter is about to spend her first week at Sleepaway Camp. But every week, there’s a new cause for panic. What if I get bitten by a snake, what if I get stung by wasps, what if I can’t pass the swim test, what if I can’t sleep, what if I can’t remember the words to the campfire songs…how do I help quell her anxiety and get her excited about camp?

A
Going off to camp for the first time is an exciting event. There is a new type of independence, new friends, new foods, new activities, and overall new experiences. However, as reality sets in the child begins to have a lot of questions such as the ones you’ve mentioned. The phrase “What if” typically leads to anxiety because the imagination takes off with resulting feelings of not being in control of a situation or not knowing the outcome.

The anxiety and fears that your daughter is experiencing are normal. Essentially, fears are necessary and help us to learn how to deal with problems. The anxiety helps us become hyper-vigilant to a possible danger so that we can react in an appropriate manner when necessary. Some common physical reactions are increased heart rate, nervous twitches, nausea, headaches, and with children in particular, clingy behavior.

Throughout life we go through various developmental stages. While unsure of your daughter’s exact age, the main tasks for children between the ages of five and 18 are to develop competence in various skills and to develop a sense of identity as to who they are as individuals. Looking at her fears from that perspective will hopefully help normalize them as she strives toward being competent at camp in what she does and integrating her successes into who she is becoming as a young lady.

A big plus that I see is that your daughter is she is identifying her fears and verbalizing them to you. Bravo daughter! Speaking fears and concerns aloud help to take the power away from them. It serves as a type of “exposure” to the situation that is feared so that with additional exposure it is not this “big monster” that it was initially.

The following suggestions may be useful in helping your daughter:

1. Help her understand that her fears are normal and tell her you understand her concerns. Let her know most kids probably have similar feelings and commend her for sharing her concerns.
2. Reassure her that the camp leaders are well trained on supervising kids and in addressing emergencies.
3. Remind her you are only a phone call away if there was an emergency.
4. Teach her how to breathe from her diaphragm to manage feelings of anxiety.
5. Help her develop a list of positive affirmations to practice such as, “I know I will enjoy camp and have a lot of fun experiences.”
6. Help her visualize a peaceful scene such as a lake with a bunny hopping by on the grass. Combine it with the diaphragmatic breathing and whenever she discloses her fears so that this “exposure” is followed by the peaceful scene to reduce stress.
7. Give her an object such as a stone with the word peace to take with her to camp and pull out any time she feels the need.

These tools and the reassurance that you provide her should help with having a great time at camp and wonderful memories of her supportive mom.

Camp Fear

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