

family

Buck Up, Little Camper

Debating whether to send a 6-year-old away for the summer.

By Emily Bazelon

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What parent sends their 6-year-old to sleep-away camp? The idea sounds old-fashioned and cold to me, like British boarding school for boys in short pants. But the number of children under 9 who go to overnight camp is rising. And while many assume that parents who send their young kids to camp do so to make the summer easier for themselves—because they're working too hard or in the throes of a divorce—that's not really the case. Overnight camp isn't for every 6-year-old, but for a hearty subset, a summer sleeping on the top bunk and making [God's eyes](#) with fellow sprites can be heavenly. The reason more children this age don't go is that the parents, not the kids, aren't ready.

Seventy-nine percent of the overnight camps that responded to a survey last year by the American Camping Association reported growing or steady numbers of campers in the under-9 set. The jump wasn't big—two-thirds of the camps reported increases of between 1 percent and 7 percent—but it's part of a decade-long upward trend. The ACA lists 54 sleep-away camps around the country (out of almost 2,400) that take children starting at 6, for anywhere from one week to eight weeks. So much for the idea that camp for children this young is something out of Dickens.

But if the ranks of pint-size campers are increasing, there is still a stigma attached to choosing sleep-away camp for the youngest. "Most children will feel abandoned or sent away, rather than sent to have a good time," the child psychologist Vivian Friedman wrote in a disapproving column in the *Birmingham News*. "The children sent away at this young age typically have little time with or nurturance from parents during the school year. They are already vulnerable children." This pretty much matched my own thoughts. Parenting is all too often about affirming one's own uncertain choices by looking down your nose at the choices of others ("At least I'd never do *that!*" we comfort ourselves). Overnight camp for first- and second-graders seemed like one of those dividing lines to me—a way to tell the devoted parents from the ones who are eager to outsource their kids.

I should have known better, because my husband, Paul, who has loving and attentive parents, went to overnight camp when he was 7. His parents sent him (with his older brother and a cousin) because they had such fond memories of camp. He didn't feel shipped off. Camp is where he won the blue ribbon for most accurate soccer kick. Paul thinks my notion that 6 is too young for overnight camp is ridiculous. As a teenager, he worked as a counselor in a cabin of 6-year-olds. Sure, they wet the bed. But he doesn't remember a lot of homesickness. He remembers them singing "[The Green Grass Grew All Around](#)" in the dining hall.

The six camp directors I called had similar perspectives. They were careful to say that they tailor the activities they offer to the interests of a younger age group—"You don't do mountain biking and zip line with 6-year-olds," one remarked. They also hire more counselors, to bring down staff-camper ratios to 5-to-1 or 3-to-1, and seek out counselors for the youngest cabins who are especially attuned to little kids' needs. "They have to have a little bit of Momma in them," said Si Ragsdale, the longtime owner of Camp Stewart for Boys in Hunt, Texas. If you take these precautionary steps, you end up with a fairly content group of 6- and 7-year-olds, the directors reported. Several said that young kids often have an easier time adjusting to camp than their older peers. Camp becomes their frame of reference more quickly, and they are not necessarily more prone to homesickness. Because of their ability to adjust, they may be less likely to pine for Mom than a 10- or 11-year-old who has never been away from home before.

You can discount the testimony of the directors as self-serving. On the other hand, if younger campers routinely dissolved into puddles of weepy neediness, most camps would probably scrap their 6-year-old cabins. The hassle factor would be too high, and parents would hear tales of woe and stop applying.

The camp directors were unanimous on another point: Parents who send young kids to camp aren't more likely to be divorced, or careerist professionals. They include plenty of intact families and stay-at-home moms. "The only common thread I see is that parents who went to camp when they were young, and enjoyed it, tend to select it for their young children," said Rodger Popkin, co-owner and director for 35 years of Blue Star Camps in Hendersonville, N.C., and a past president of the American Camping Association. His statement was representative; the directors also said that younger siblings often start camp at an earlier age because their older siblings have come home raving. In other words, parents generally don't dump their young kids at camp to be rid of them. They send them as a gift (after all, this is an experience that can cost \$1,000 a week). And, if anything, most tend to be overcautious about whether their children are ready to be away from home.

That group includes me. Our 6-year-old, Eli, is going to a day camp this summer in the Maryland woods. He's nervous—"What if a deer gets stuck in the pool?" he asked the other night. But he also can't quite believe his luck: He gets to shoot a bow and arrow and, yes, a BB gun, with our endorsement. Still, I would never have sent Eli to sleep-away camp. Not this summer and not for the next, and I'm not sure how many more. Paul thinks this is my problem. And Eli seems to as well. When I asked him how old he wants to be before he might go to overnight camp, he said, "Maybe 9." "Why?," I asked. "It'll be easier then, probably. And you'll get to have a few more years with me." Give that boy a blue ribbon.

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