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Summer Camp and Introverted Children: Watch Them Bloom

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Some children have a natural ease in new situations and jump right into the thick of the action. They enjoy the conversation that comes with the getting-to-know-you stage of friendships, and view a new social setting such as camp as an adventure.

Other children are less eager to plunge into new social situations, preferring to watch from the periphery, studying the scene until they feel comfortable enough to join in. And sometimes they aren't able to find their comfort zone, and decide not to join in. Unlike their gregarious counterparts, they do not have the chit-chat ability which helps create a sense of belonging in a new group. Some parents may worry that summer camp would be too stressful for children who are more introverted.

Small Groups Are Inviting

Before deciding against the summer camp experience for a less gregarious child, parents should consider a few facts about the camp atmosphere. Tom Madeyski, Executive Director of the Resident Camp Branch of the San Diego County YMCA, explains that the ratio of adults to children at summer camps is very different from the typical school setting, where less outgoing kids can sometimes feel lost.

At YMCA resident camps there are two counselors for each ten kids, allowing for individualized attention and close supervision of group dynamics. Counselors are carefully selected and are dedicated to helping create a positive camp experience for all kinds of campers.

“They are trained in engaging the children in small group activities designed for effective team-building and creating interdependence,” Madeyski says.

As counselors work with their groups, each child begins to realize that he plays an important role in his new camp community. The beauty of team-building games, when skillfully implemented, is that children are able to recognize that within their differences lie strengths.

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The small group focus of most camps can be inviting to children who are more reserved, giving them a chance to build confidence and social skills. Indeed, almost any child feels more comfortable in a new group of five than they would in a sea of 25.

While it's always important to include a child in the decision as to which camp to attend, with an introverted child it is essential. Madeyski suggests visiting the camps beforehand, if possible. He points out that, if the visit is coordinated to include time to talk with some of the camp staff, your child may "feel connected before he gets there," making the whole idea of camp more appealing.

Cindy Moore, currently a camp volunteer with Girl Scouts, San Diego-Imperial Council, has 40 years of experience with campers. She reminds parents to be thoughtful about the way they introduce the idea of camp. "If parents are convinced camp is part of their child's growth and development, they will communicate positively to their child."

Obviously, a child who is hesitant about new social situations will not respond well to the statement, "We're going to send you to camp." However, a sensitive child will feel their parents' ambivalence if asked, "Well, do you think you want to go?" It is possible to find a middle ground when discussing camp options, taking your child's social comfort level into account. For instance, to rally enthusiasm parents could suggest a day camp geared toward their child's interests as a first step towards a resident camp.

Labels: Who Needs Them?

Another point to consider is that, as parents, we sometimes assume our children will be more similar to us than they are in reality. We need to remember that they may not respond to a new social environment in the same way we would. Parents who are more reserved, and were probably branded "shy" as children, should not automatically expect their child to have the same reticent traits.

On the other hand, extroverted parents, perhaps once labeled as "chatterboxes," should make an effort to have empathy for a child who takes longer to warm up to new social situations. Our children are not mirror images of ourselves, nor would we want them to be.

Kids learn a lot from role models with strengths, skills and personality traits that are different from their parents, and camp is an ideal opportunity in this way. So, part of the decision about offering our "quiet" child the experience of camp involves puzzling out our own inner motivations and wishes for our child. Keep in mind that sometimes a brief journey outside the comfort zone (our child's and ours) is the best gift for everyone.

Moore sheds light on the fact that camp is a place where children don't need to be burdened by labels such as "shy." "Starting in Kindergarten, kids are labeled. They come to camp with a clean slate, giving them a chance to experiment with who they are," Moore says. "This is why kids coming to camp by themselves often do better than the kids who come with friends."

As comforting as a school buddy is, a pal can deter a child from being open to new social possibilities, and even new friends.

Moore observes that children generally make friends easily because of the structure of the camp community. "If you don't treat them as if they are shy they can blossom," Moore asserts.

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Give ‘em Roots and Wings

Moore feels strongly that camp is a rite of passage. “We’ve all heard the old saying, ‘Give ‘em roots and wings.’ Well, camp is part of giving our kids wings,” she says.

So, as Tom Madeyski acknowledges, “Sending your child to camp does require a leap of faith to get past the ‘what-ifs’” that often plague parents. But our children are more adaptable than we think. If we can manage to foresee expanded horizons on the other side of the camp experience, we will allow our introspective children to surprise us. Some “wallflowers” just might emerge as sunflowers as soon as we look the other way.

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