

The Dark Side of Parental Devotion How Camp Can Let the Sun Shine

By Wendy Mogel, Ph.D.

A friend of mine is a college placement counselor in an academically competitive high school. She is always amazed by how quickly her phone calls to parents get returned. She feels like she has a red phone at the White House. When one dad returned her call she heard an odd noise in the background.

"What's that noise?" she asked.

The Dad: "Oh, it's nothing. I can talk. I'm just doing a colonoscopy."

The counselor: "I don't feel comfortable continuing the conversation. I'll call you back later."

While this example, with its unusual life or death flavor, is extreme, it is typical of tales I hear every day about the bizarre behavior of devoted, intelligent, loving parents.

A parent brings a bouquet of roses to a child playing the part of a bush in the winter pageant. A father buys his son a drum set as a reward for eating carrots. A kindergartener not of Asian heritage takes Japanese lessons five days a week after school. His father explains, "I want to make sure my son has an edge in the Pacific Rim economy." A parent responds to a teacher telling him that his son has been throwing rocks with an indignant, "I don't understand. Why do you have any rocks on the play yard?"

Our children are highly protected. George Carlin, in his comedy CD, *We Are All Diseased*, complains about Americans' preoccupation with child safety. He asks, "What ever happened to natural selection? If a child swallows seven marbles, maybe we don't want him to reproduce."

"Good Suffering"

I travel around the country lecturing to parents and no matter what my specific topic, I always make sure to talk about "good suffering." I tell parents that it is good for kids to be bored, unhappy, disappointed and confused, to feel deprived, to tolerate longing, and to be cold, wet, or hungry for more than one and a half seconds before they graduate from high school. It is good for them to have a crabby, unenlightened, uninspiring fifth grade teacher. Why? Because they are absolutely for sure going to have a crabby, unenlightened, uninspiring boss when they have a job one day and are likely to have a crabby, unenlightened, uninspiring spouse . . . at least the first one. And here it comes, parents are headed toward being defendants in the largest class action suit in history — our children will be suing us for stealing their childhood. I get on a roll. I tell them that it's good for girls to have a shallow, bossy, slutty best friend. That all of this is preparation for life. And that these normal rough patches provide an opportunity for parents to let go, even a little. I remind them that Freud defined the goal of psychoanalysis as "the conversion of neurotic misery to ordinary unhappiness."

Camp — Escape from Devotion

As camp professionals, I know you have your own pet tales. The parent who smuggles candy to her children in a tampon box neatly placed in a care package . . . the one who demands a refund when the trail ride is cut short due to rain . . . the one who wants you to put screens on all the windows because their child once had a bad reaction to one mosquito bite. Take, for example, the parent Bob Ditter described in his column "In the Trenches" in this magazine. After spotting her daughter in the background of a camp photo gallery on the Web, she contacts the camp director worried that the child is surely lonely and friendless because, "Just look, you'll see. In the August 15 photo number 23

B she is walking behind some other campers and not side by side with the throng." Parents whose endless worrying and whinging (a British term for the combination of whining and complaining) make you wish, some days, that you had taken your father's advice and gone into accounting.

The list of amusing war stories is endless, and it's easy to scapegoat the most anxious and overprotective parents — but I list them to illustrate the amazing potential of camp to be an antidote to some of the perils of modern life. If parents just swim with the tide (here it's easy to come down on the side of those salmon swimming upstream), they will overprotect, overindulge, and over schedule their children. They will allow their children to opt out of even the simplest chores when their children use the four magic words "I have a test." And they will look at their children with such a hyper-focused magnifier that perfectly capable kids look like handicapped royalty. And these kids come to believe that the earth does not revolve around the sun but around them.

Thorns and Roses

I went to camp for sixteen years. The whole happy slog: day camp, sleep-away camp, CIT, junior counselor, counselor, head counselor.

At Belgian Village Camp in Cummington, Massachusetts, the birthplace of the American romantic poet William Cullen Bryant, we had vespers in an elegant clearing in the forest called "the green cathedral." My friends and I sat by the pond for hours (hours!) catching tree frogs and daydreaming. Backstage smelled of clown white and musty taffeta. While riding bareback (Bareback? Someone call risk management!) a bee stung my horse. I was thrown to the ground and broke my leg but stayed out the summer and learned to fish.

A fourth grade teacher told me that she can predict which children will be homesick on the annual four-day nature retreat. "The ones who can locate their flashlight, sweatshirt, and warm socks in their duffle bag are not homesick. The ones who can't find their stuff are." She explained that this first group of children have either packed their gear themselves or with a parent's help. The second group, the homesick, has been packed for.

Kids, at camp you will get all kinds of valuable gifts: you will get homesick, other campers will be mean to you, the food won't be great, you'll be cold and hot and hungry, and you will get injured! At least a splinter. At least I hope all of this will happen to you because otherwise you are deprived. Of life. Of its thorns and its roses.

Choosing between the Good and the Good

When I was in kindergarten we didn't do a lick of academic work. We learned how to get along, how to sing a few songs, and we made ashtrays for our parents out of clay. Ashtrays!

We know what kindergarten has become. It's boot camp for the second grade standardized tests. It's serious. And we've seen this shift in camps as well. Camps have gotten academic and comfortable and fancy. We've got great marketing tools and visuals: high speed zip lines, water trampolines, knee boarding, air conditioning, Wharton faculty teaching leadership skills, film and video production workshops, programs to build casitas for the underprivileged while learning Spanish in Guatemala.

But the basic camp principle works: get kids out of the classroom, away from their parents and out of the spotlight, and they will grow. When parents remark about how tall and tan and strong their children look upon returning from camp they are also seeing new maturity and ease.

What Goes Around Comes Around — Teacups and Crispies

College deans have a name for some of the incoming students: "teacups" and "crispies." Teacups are so fragile that they

are easily broken by the knocks of college life. Crispies are so burned out that they are too brittle to enjoy anything. An increasing number are actually returning home after first semester, unable to cope. So much for that admittance to Brown or Stanford or Princeton. A report from Harvard described some of the incoming students as "dazed survivors of some bewildering lifelong boot camp."

"The incoming students have been so scheduled, so sleep deprived and pressured, that they come to college too finely tuned," complained one dean of students. "They're like thoroughbreds. If they 'throw a shoe,' they can't recover." The counselors see a rise in digestive and eating disorders, headaches, generalized anxiety disorder, substance abuse, social and school phobias, and obsessive-compulsive disorders (these are the students who can't let go of details, are perfectionistic, and overwork for school assignments). Perhaps most alarming, there has been an increase in self-injury — a desperate and poignant cry for relief. Our mental health services can barely keep up with the demand."

Last week I flew to visit my daughter in college and sat next to the mother of a happy college senior on the plane. She told me about the kids she knew who went off to college and couldn't make it. They were beautifully prepared academically, but they couldn't take being away from home. "Did your daughter go to camp?" she asked me. "Because from what I've seen," she said, "the ones who have been to camp do best."

Don't Live Up to Your Potential — Leave Some for Later

Daniel Goleman, fellow psychologist and author of *Emotional Intelligence*, discovered in his studies of highly successful adults that few world leaders or those who have made great contributions to science or art got straight A's in school. Instead, they have other qualities in common. They have high levels of emotional intelligence defined by Goleman as empathy, optimism, good teamwork, a sense of humor, as well as the ability to bounce back from failure. Good camps, with their emphasis on fellowship, independence and age-appropriate challenges make a unique contribution to the development of the whole child — disappointments, obstacles, and skinned knees — no extra charge.

And if kids go to camp there's another advantage — parents get to take a break from their work — their colonoscopies, parenting, or accounting — and have a little playtime themselves.

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