

Preparing your child for School Camp Early Years

As an adult, do you look back on your own school camp with vivid memories? A successful school camp has the power to transform a student in a very short amount of time. These are the times when students and teachers are able to bond beyond the regular boundaries of the classroom and school setting. Looking back on your experience of your first school camp can bring smiles and laughter as you remember the stories and events that took place amongst friends.

When we think back about events past and school camps, often forgotten is the anxiety of your first big trip away from home. A child's world is both magical and menacing – full of mysteries, dangers and fears of the unknown. Therefore it's only natural that there may be some anxiety about the unfamiliar world of a school camp setting. Thankfully there are several practical things that carers and parents can do to ease and support their kids towards a fun and fruitful camp experience.

Overnight camps offer invaluable benefits to children. They offer a strong sense of community, teaching children how to live amongst one another and share. The opportunity to live separate from parents for a period of time shows children how to be independent and self-reliant. School camps are often designed with challenging activities as a part of the program, which place students in new, unfamiliar settings; offering them a chance to build a new foundation of confidence of which the benefits extend into the classroom, and many other aspects of life. Self-reliance, self-regulation, heightened social and interpersonal skills, teamwork and problem solving are all important life skills developed in the experiences of a school camp, and these are all incredibly important to a child's transition into adolescence and the challenges of adulthood.

School camps typically expose children to outdoor recreation and learning activities in outdoor environments. Research suggests that these experiences have restorative benefits and a positive effect on stress reduction and the prevention of depression. Giving students a positive experience of an outdoor, active lifestyle has also been found to potentially harness children's use of the outdoors in their life beyond camps; increasing their levels of physical activity and contributing to a range of positive health outcomes.

Despite the range of positives that a school camp can boast for your child, it's likely that there may be some challenges for them in taking that leap towards the school camp experience. Common stumbling blocks for a child in happily embracing the idea of attending a school camp may include:

- Fear of social alienation, or 'being left out'
- Anxieties regarding their safety
- Separation anxiety and homesickness

These potential obstacles can be a challenge not only for the child, but for parents too. It's not always an easy thing to let your children leave you for days, or even a week at a time. However there are definitely things that parents can do to mentally prepare themselves and their children for the period of time away from home.

Consider past experiences. How does your child go at sleepovers or in unfamiliar situations? Depending on the camp and on the individual child, it may be too much of a leap for them to attend a week long excursion if they're normally calling you in tears at midnight and needing to come home. Consider the individual needs of your child, and if the leap is going to be unrealistic, set some goals on how you can grow their level of independence gradually.

Talk to your child. When the opportunity to attend school camp arises, ask your kids how they feel about it. Are they excited by the idea? Do they have any fears? During this conversation you may be able to discern any anxieties or unnecessary mental obstacles, and reassure them with your own positive school camp experiences from your own childhood. Communication with

your child will help them get their head around the potential experience of a camp Be positive by saying things like this will be fun, you'll enjoy the challenges".

Practice 'independence' skills at home. Because your child is going to be away from home, there may be a list of things that need to be tackled and mastered before being released to a higher level of independence. Learning to tie their own shoelaces, clean up their dinner plate, wash their hair, or choose and organise their clothes are all things that a child will need to be able to do before they leave. Some of the more practical skills for children to experiment with can be doing their own hair especially if its long as they may need it tied up for a number of activities, learning how to apply their own sunscreen; turning on hot shower taps and cutting their own food can be very useful skills to bring along to camp. Helping your kids to achieve these independent skills, and encouraging them along the way will heighten their confidence in being away from home.

Prepare, make lists, and pack together. Involving your child in the packing and preparation process will help them take personal ownership over their experience and increase their confidence that they'll have a safe trip. Schools will normally provide a specific list of items that your child will need to pack for the needs of their camp. Rather than excluding your child from the packing process, involve them in it. Reviewing and making lists and asking them all the things they think they'll personally need will open up conversation about any fears they may have, and will allow you to reassure them that they're going to be well prepared for any possible situation that may occur. For example, if your child is afraid of being away from home, maybe you could discuss or suggest they pack their favourite pillow or blanket or photograph.

Keep communication with school staff. One of the important roles of being a teacher is to maintain communication with parents wherever needed. Don't be afraid to call any of the teachers who will be supervising your child to raise any concerns, worries or practical issues that may need to be addressed. Having these conversations will allow the teachers to be aware of your child's specific needs; making their job easier, as well as reassuring you that your child's individual needs will be met.

Keep positive. Remaining positive and using language that show's your child that you believe they're ready for school camp, and that they'll have a great time will help your child to believe it too.

School camps are some of the most exciting, life building experiences that a child can have. Preparing your child through these simple steps is a great way to de-bunk any superficial fears or worries that may be preventing them from getting there, and reaping the immense developmental benefits that school camps have to offer.