

Camp and Cell Phones

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Camp might be the place to hang up the phone

When packing the kids off to summer camp an increasingly common issue has become whether or not to include a cell phone along with the sunscreen, lifejacket and insect repellent. Cell phone use among children and adolescents is becoming widespread and the marketing trend is towards increasingly younger age groups. Kid's cell phones make good sense for reasons of contact and security. But is it good sense to send a cell phone into camp with your child?

Camp directors have noted an increase of personal phones coming into camp. Although these devices can give parents a feeling of closer contact, control and peace of mind, are they necessary or indeed appropriate in a camp environment? The question a parent or guardian should ask themselves is what was the rationale for giving their child a cell phone in the first place?

Cell phones have a real purpose in our fast paced lives. That purpose has much to do with security, the communication of ever changing schedules and the "comfort" to children and their parents or guardians of instant unimpeded contact anytime anywhere.

But what purpose is served by sending a cell phone into camp? Is it a concern with safety? Parents and guardians presumably select a camp with discretion and a confidence that the administration and staff will maintain their child's safety on a 24 hour basis. Is it the need for instant communication? Camp is a place where time is slowed down to a walking pace. It is a place for personal development, interacting with cabin mates, and reflecting on the natural surroundings.

Details of day to day life are best communicated with a good old fashioned postal letter. Letter writing is not mere nostalgia. Opposed to a hasty utterance into an electronic device, composing a letter allows for introspection and gives a young person the time needed to reflect on new surroundings and new experiences.



What Could Happen

Let's look at a two examples of campers who are packing cell phones.

Alicia is a first time camper. Although she is excited about camp she still has the normal pre-camp jitters. "What if I feel homesick and want to come home?" Her parents wisely point out to her how much fun she will have and talk about new friends and the exciting activities. However, as camp draws nearer her anxiety increases and so a deal is struck. Alicia will take a cell phone packed in the bottom of her suitcase. If she becomes really homesick she can just call home.

Not the Best Plan

This plan seems to do the trick and Alicia happily goes off to camp. However, the plan is flawed and has set Alicia up for potentially isolating herself from her peers and mentors. If in the first few days of camp she begins to experience normal separation anxiety she will in all likelihood

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turn first to the cell phone. She is less likely to turn to her counselors or cabin mates who would help her get over her temporary feelings while allowing her to develop the independence and interdependence that her parents supposedly sent her to camp to learn.

Many camps have a "wait and see policy" with regard to campers making phone calls home. A good call home is pre-arranged and made when the parent or guardian will be available to receive the call. Calls are never made at night but always during the excitement of the day's events. They are also timed so that the camper will go off to a favorite activity immediately after talking and ideally the counselor should be available to speak with the parent or guardian and then spend some time with the camper after the call.

Missing in Action

Wayne has gone to camp for the last five years. He and his buddies attend every summer and they quite literally spend their winter counting the days until the bus rolls off to camp. Wayne has the latest in cell phone technology – camera, Bluetooth, MP3 playback, gaming capability and even video. He is particularly taken with its' gadgetry and displays the phone to everybody at camp. All around camp you can hear Wayne's voice. "I'm not using it as a phone - it's my camera!" "It's not a phone it's my MP3 player!" "Hey, Shawn brought a video game to camp - this is the same thing!"

One day after lunch Wayne can't find his phone. He is certain he had it at the ropes course and now he can't find it. Wayne becomes frantic. Was it lost or stolen? The phone was very expensive; what is he going to tell his parents? If it's lost that's bad enough but what if somebody's raking up phone bills? Although many offer to help Wayne in his search he has become suspicious of everyone.

The rest of Wayne's camp days are spent in complete distraction from camp life. He is preoccupied with the whereabouts of his missing phone and doubts the sincerity of



his cabin mates and counselors. He has lost not only his phone but also his standing with his friends, his involvement as a member of a community and the opportunity to have the benefit of a favorite summer pastime.

Many camp directors are emphatic that cell phones, video games and MP3 players have no place at camp. I believe what they are trying to convey is that a break from technology can offer the opportunity to experience daily life in a simpler and more basic fashion. Camp life offers this occasion through physical activity, face to face interaction and living close to nature – all of which are becoming a rarity in today's world.