

To Attend with a Friend – or Not...

Is going to camp with a friend the right choice for you?

by Laura M. Miller

Some kids insist on trekking off to camp with a best buddy. Others would never hear of it. So, is there a right? Is there a wrong? Absolutely! But the answer is different for each individual. To decide which choice is right for your child, think carefully about your goals for his or her summer experience. Are you looking for your child to escape the local crowd and embrace an opportunity to be out on his or her own? Are you looking to fortify existing friendships? Perhaps your child is shy and needs the comfort of a familiar face.

Attending a new camp can be intimidating for even the most confident individual. New campers are completely breaking away from their comfort zone, and it is normal for most kids feel out of sorts during the first several days. While the thought of having a built-in friend may seem comforting now, think ahead. How will your child feel once the dust has settled and he or she is acclimated to the new situation? Will this buddy still be great to have around -- or might your child be resentful of this friend's presence? Think about the possible situations that may arise, and how your camper and said friend might navigate these issues.

"I wanted my daughter to go alone," said Karen Alford of Melville, NY. "I wanted Dana to have what I had: a whole separate group of camp friends. One of my best friends today is someone I went to camp with. We wouldn't have that friendship today had we met any differently." Prior to camp, Alford contacted her daughter's camp, Camp Poyntelle in Poyntelle, PA, for the name of another first-time camper in her area. The girls met beforehand and even went camp shopping together. As Alford said, "If nothing else, it was a familiar face on the bus. It was up to them whether they would forge a lasting friendship."

Arlene Streisand, director of Camp Specialists, a free camp referral service in Jericho, NY, feels it is often the parents, versus the camper, who want their child to know another person at camp. But she believes all kids go to camp with the intent of making new friends. Streisand says, "I personally think that camp friends and home friends should be separate. Kids experience so many special things at camp. If they are fortunate enough to bond with other campers, they will always be able to reflect back upon these experiences together." Streisand continues, "Going with a friend from home can inhibit branching out and meeting other kids. Or, worse, the friendship could backfire as one friend wishes to branch out and the other friend feels left out. This could lead to trouble back at home."

Zach Cohen of Oceanside, NY believes he had the best of both worlds when he started at Camp Chipinaw in Swan Lake, NY four summers ago. "I didn't plan to go to camp with friends," he explained, "but two of my friends ended up choosing the same camp. Luckily, we all agreed to bunk separately. This way, we had the comfort of a friend nearby, but also an opportunity to meet other kids."

Laura Pierce, co-director of Camp Birchmont in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire says, "The important thing is to make sure that the camp is a good fit for both kids. As friends you should at least have parallel interests or the friendship may suffer, as one of friend thrives and the other may not."

Will Pierce, experienced Birchmont group leader, adds that families should not under-estimate the role staff plays in cabin dynamics and in making a situation like this a success. He says, "Sometimes adolescent kids are too close to a situation regarding a friend and may not notice that the friendship has become too insular or negative." He points out that, "A good staff member can subtly, but proactively, encourage individual interests, activities and the formation of new friends." In fact, he feels it's one of the lessons you can naturally learn in camp, which may translate to larger situations later in life, like going to college or working with a friend.

If you do decide to have your child attend camp and bunk with a friend from home, think carefully about the state of this particular friendship. Sit down with both friends and both sets of parents for a pre-summer conversation to discuss the following questions:

- Are both children new to this camp or does one friend have a history there -- and how will that history play out?
- Is this a recent or longstanding friendship?
- Are the kids equal partners in the friendship?
- Do friends know how to successfully work out your differences?
- Does either child get jealous easily?
- How will one child feel when other bonds closely with others?

No friend should be too reliant on another, as this does not bode well for either child. And don't allow another family to pressure you into a situation that you're not comfortable with. Know when to say no!

A little pre-planning and effort goes a long way and speaks volumes as to how the friendship will move forward at camp. All friendships evolve. But the hope is that summer camp will add a richer and deeper dynamic to children who are already friendly in school or in their community.

So what's the answer to the age-old question: should your child attend camp with a friend from home? The answer is, trust your instincts, think ahead and – most importantly – communicate with your child, the other child's family, and with camp staff. Together you can decide what the right choice will be to ensure a successful summer situation.

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