Loosen the Apron Strings; [Op-Ed]


Abstract (Document Summary)

It's been well-chronicled for a couple of years now that rough-it-out, independence-building nature camps -- like the Episcopal Camp and Conference Center that I attended in the 1970's -- are on the decline, steadily losing market share to more cushy places with air-conditioners, computers and highly structured sports that provide more of the comforts, and stresses, of home.

Recently, reading in The Chicago Tribune how increasing numbers of struggling Midwestern sleep-away camps are selling out to real estate developers, I discovered something new: parents aren't not sending their kids away to traditional camps just because they want them home drilling for the SAT. They're not sending them away to camp because they want them home, period.

Responding to this new market reality, many sleep-away camps are ditching their self-reliance-fostering reasons for being, and are doing everything they can to keep parents and kids connected. Some provide two-way e-mail access. Others have set up Web cameras. For their efforts, they get parents conducting remote surveillance and, as The Washington Post has reported, calling up to ask why this daughter hasn't changed clothes or why that son is wearing a Band-Aid. Some camps have whittled down their session offerings to as few as two days. "The Speed Session," The Journal called this. Eight-week sessions are a rarity. Parents, it seems, just can't stomach them.

Full Text (758 words)

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Judith Warner, the author of "Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety" and a contributing columnist for TimesSelect, will be a guest columnist through the end of July.

There was nothing less than rage in my good friend's voice as she read me the line from the summer camp handbook for parents: "Children expect to hear from you daily."
"What's the point?" she fumed. "I thought the whole purpose of sleep-away camp was to build independence."

Perhaps it was -- once. But these days, that notion seems to be going the way of cliff diving and watermelon with spittable black seeds.

It's been well-chronicled for a couple of years now that rough-it-out, independence-building nature camps -- like the Episcopal Camp and Conference Center that I attended in the 1970's -- are on the decline, steadily losing market share to more cushy places with air-conditioners, computers and highly structured sports that provide more of the comforts, and stresses, of home.

It's been well-documented, too, just how miserable summer has become for the legions of high school students who now spend their vacation months boning up on chemistry and physics or racking up community service or internship hours, in order to take on an ever-more-turbocharged course load in the fall.

But recently, reading in The Chicago Tribune how increasing numbers of struggling Midwestern sleep-away camps are selling out to real estate developers, I discovered something new: parents aren't not sending their kids away to traditional camps just because they want them home drilling for the SAT. They're not sending them away to camp because they want them home, period.

Many parents "don't want their kids to be gone for long periods or at all," is how The Tribune put it.

Parents today, apparently, don't want their kids out in the wilds, where they might walk in the paths of potentially tick-bearing Bambis. They don't want the kids out of reach, where they can't take a mood reading at each and every at-risk moment of the day.

Jeff Solomon, executive director of the National Camp Association, told The Wall Street Journal a few months back that some parents even question whether those who send their children away for extended camps "really love their kids." Seems the bonds of loving family life feel so fragile that, it's feared, they might be broken by a protracted separation (during which the kids might actually have fun).

Responding to this new market reality, many sleep-away camps are ditching their self-reliance-fostering reasons for being, and are doing everything they can to keep parents and kids connected. Some provide two-way e-mail access. Others have set up Web cameras. For their efforts, they get parents conducting remote surveillance and, as The Washington Post has reported, calling up to ask why this daughter hasn't changed clothes or why that son is wearing a Band-Aid. Some camps have whittled down their session offerings to as few as two days. "The Speed Session," The Journal called this. Eight-week sessions are a rarity. Parents, it seems, just can't stomach them.

It's such a terrible pity.

When we dropped off our daughter, Julia, for her first time at sleep-away camp this month, a single thought formed itself in my head as we pulled away and I watched her delightedly slathering Nutella on white bread only 20 minutes after lunch. It was: How lucky she is -- how truly fortunate -- to have six solid days without me.

Six days of eating whatever, whenever, she pleased. Six days of freedom from violin and math drills.

Six days away from swim team and tightly scheduled play dates, and an in-school day camp that felt, well, like school. Six days away from my questions, and worries, and insistence that books be read from front to back, with dust jackets intact, then shelved with spines facing up, vertically, please. Six days to breathe.

If it were possible to do so, I would send Julia away to the camp that she loves for a full month next year. This despite the fact that merely thinking about it floods me with separation anxiety so intense that it radiates down my arms as I type.

I, like many parents, hate that my children are growing up and away.

("The sands are flowing out of the hourglass," I said to my husband, Max, the other evening.

"Through the hourglass," he said. "They flow through."

"Is that a philosophical observation?" I asked. Conversation!

"Nope," he said. "Just a copy edit.")

It's in their best interest. We've got to let them go.