

CharlottesvilleFamily™ MY CAMP COUNTDOWN!

A Parent's Survival Guide

Helping your child (and yourself!) prepare for an amazing adventure

YOU'VE GOT THIS

The Truth About First-Time Sleepaway Camp

Taking the leap to sleepaway camp is huge - for your child AND for you. If you're feeling a mix of excitement and anxiety, you're not alone. After 25 years of helping Charlottesville families navigate this milestone, we've seen hundreds of parents have these exact same feelings.

Here's what we know: The vast majority of first-time campers have an incredible experience. The key is preparation—not just for your child, but for you too.

"I cried dropping him off. He cried for 20 minutes the first night. By day two, he didn't want to come to the phone when I called. Best decision we ever made."

-Charlottesville mom of three, all camp alumni

This Guide Will Help You:

- Prepare your child emotionally for overnight camp
- Know what to pack (and what NOT to pack)
- Manage your own separation anxiety
- Recognize normal homesickness vs. when to intervene
- Set up communication that works
- Help your child process the experience afterward

Remember: Camp directors have seen it all. They're your partners in this, not your judges. Don't hesitate to reach out with questions or concerns.

PREPARING YOUR CHILD

(4-6 Weeks Before)



GETTING YOUR CHILD READY FOR SUCCESS

The Conversation Starters

Start talking about camp positively but realistically. Don't oversell it or hide potential challenges.

TALK ABOUT:

- What camp will be like (activities, cabin life, new friends)
- What makes them excited AND nervous (both are normal!)
- That you might miss each other (and that's okay)
- How they'll handle challenges
- The new skills they'll learn

AVOID:

- "You're going to LOVE it!" (sets up pressure)
- "Don't worry, you won't be homesick" (dismisses feelings)
- "If you hate it, we'll pick you up" (creates escape plan)
- Sharing your own anxieties
- Making it seem like a punishment

PRACTICE:

- Sleepovers with friends or family
- Time away from home]
- Making their own bed
- Managing belongings
- Basic hygiene independence
- Problem-solving without you

Age-Appropriate Preparation

Age 7-9


- Read camp books together
- Practice writing letters/postcards
- Visit camp if possible
- Keep prep light and fun

Age 10-12

- Let them help pack
- Discuss realistic scenarios
- Let them choose activities
- Build independence now

Age 13+

- Give space but check in
- Trust their readiness
- Respect their process
- Don't over-parent

 If your child is adamantly opposed to camp and it's not their choice at all, reconsider. Camp works best when kids have some buy-in, even if they're nervous.

Find the perfect camp for your child:



THE WEEK BEFORE & DROP-OFF DAY



FINAL COUNTDOWN

The Week Before Camp

DO:

- Pack together, letting them help
- Label EVERYTHING (yes, even socks)
- Take photos of packed items
- Keep routines normal
- Tuck surprise notes in their luggage
- Confirm medications/forms are complete
- Let them choose a small comfort item

DON'T:

- Over-discuss camp constantly
- Make major changes to routine
- Share your own worries
- Promise daily phone calls (unless camp allows)
- Pack forbidden items (electronics, candy)

Love note idea: Write 7 letters—one for each day of camp—and give to the counselor to distribute. "Open when you're missing home," "Open when you make a new friend," etc.

Drop-Off Day Survival

FOR YOUR CHILD:

Keep it short and positive:

1. Help them settle into cabin
2. Meet counselors, say hello
3. Quick tour if time permits
4. Hug, positive words, GO
5. Don't linger—it's harder for everyone

AVOID:

1. Long, emotional goodbyes
2. Last-minute warnings/reminders
3. "Call me if you need me"
4. Crying in front of them (save it for the car)
5. Coming back for "one more hug"

"The hardest part is the drive home. By the time I got there, I had a text from camp with a photo of her smiling. Worth every tear."

— Alexandria mom

Find the perfect camp for your child:



Managing Your Week

COMMUNICATION EXPECTATIONS

Every camp handles communication differently. Know your camp's policy:

MAIL:

- Letters take 2-3 days—send early!
- Keep letters positive and newsy
- Ask questions they can answer
- Don't ask "Do you want to come home?"

PHOTOS:

- Many camps post daily photos online
- Don't panic if you don't see yours daily
- Not every kid is in every photo

PHONE CALLS:

- Some camps allow calls, some don't
- Scheduled calls can be hard (kid might be having fun and call is disruptive)
- Don't request calls in first 48 hours unless emergency

EMAIL/MESSAGING:

- Know the camp's system
- Keep messages upbeat
- Remember: they may not respond!

Homesickness: When to Worry (and When Not To)

NORMAL ✓ (Don't intervene)

- Tears at bedtime first 1-2 nights
- "I miss you" in letters
- Mentions missing pet/siblings
- Quiet/withdrawn first day
- One sad phone call

WATCH ⚠️ (Monitor, touch base with camp)

- Not eating for 24+ hours
- Not participating in any activities
- Multiple days of crying
- Physical complaints (stomachache from stress)
- Mentions wanting to leave

CONCERNING 🚨 (Talk to camp director)

- Not eating/sleeping for 48+ hours
- Harming self or others
- Severe panic attacks
- Camp says they're struggling significantly
- Your gut says something is really wrong

When to call camp: Most camps prefer you call them rather than your child. The director can give you honest assessment. Your child might cry on the phone but be fine 5 minutes later—the call itself can trigger homesickness.

Find the perfect camp for your child:



PICKUP & THE DAYS AFTER

REUNION & REENTRY

WHAT TO EXPECT:

Your child might be:

- Thrilled to see you (yay!)
- Oddly distant or quiet (normal—processing)
- Exhausted and cranky (they haven't slept well)
- Sad to leave their new friends (good sign!)
- Overstimulated and wired (adrenaline)

👉 **Brace Yourself:** Some kids regress temporarily—clingy, whiny, or emotional for 24-48 hours. This is normal processing. They've been "on" for a week. Let them decompress.

YOUR PICKUP PLAN:

- Arrive on time (not early—it disrupts camp)
- Bring snacks and water for the ride
- Don't over-question immediately
- Help them say goodbye to friends
- Get counselor contact info (if they want)
- Check lost & found
- Expect the car to smell like a gym bag

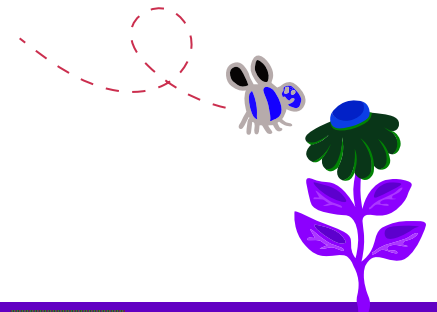
The First 48 Hours Home

DO:

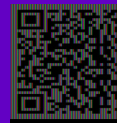
- Let them sleep (a lot!)
- Serve favorite foods
- Give space to reconnect with home
- Let them share stories in their own time
- Look through their creations/crafts together
- Be patient with re-adjustment

DON'T:

- Bombard with questions
- Immediately schedule activities
- Force thank-you notes right away
- Compare to siblings' camp experiences
- Criticize if they're moody



Find the perfect camp for your child:



PICKUP & THE DAYS AFTER

REUNION & REENTRY CONTINUED...

Processing the Experience

DAYS 1-2: Exhaustion, stories pouring out OR complete silence. Both normal.

DAYS 3-5: Mentioning camp friends, wanting to stay connected. Missing camp routine.

WEEK 2: Back to normal life. May ask about next summer!

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

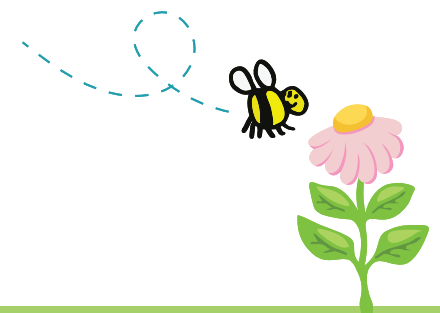
Instead of "Did you have fun?" try:

- "What was your favorite activity?"
- "Tell me about your cabin mates"
- "What was the funniest thing that happened?"
- "What was harder than you expected?"
- "What surprised you?"
- "What did you learn about yourself?"

SIGNS THEY HAD A GOOD TIME:

Even if they don't say it directly:

- Mentioning camp friends by name
- Using camp songs/cheers at home
- Asking to keep in touch
- Wearing camp gear proudly
- Already asking about next summer
- Sharing inside jokes from camp"



Find the perfect camp for your child:



COMMON PARENT WORRIES

YOUR QUESTIONS. ANSWERED

Q: What if they call crying and begging to come home?

A: Take a deep breath. First, call the camp director (not your child). Ask for their honest assessment. Often, kids cry on the phone but are fine 10 minutes later—the call itself triggers emotions. Camp directors have seen this hundreds of times and can tell you if it's normal homesickness or genuine distress. Trust their expertise. If it's day 1-2, give it at least 24 more hours unless the director recommends otherwise.

Q: Should I pack a phone "just in case"?

A: No. If camp doesn't allow phones, don't sneak one. It undermines camp authority and makes homesickness worse (they'll focus on calling you instead of engaging). If there's an emergency, the camp will contact you immediately.

Q: What if they come home saying they were bullied?

A: Listen carefully without immediately reacting. Ask specific questions: "What happened? Who was involved? Did you tell a counselor?" Sometimes conflicts between kids are framed as "bullying" when it's actually normal social friction. Contact the camp director to get their perspective. Accredited camps have anti-bullying policies and will address legitimate concerns. Use it as a teaching moment about advocacy and conflict resolution.

Q: They want to quit mid-week. Should I let them?

A: Rarely. Unless there's a serious issue (verified by camp director), sticking it out teaches resilience. Many kids who "hated" camp the first few days love it by the end. However, if your child is genuinely in distress (not eating, not sleeping, severe anxiety), trust your gut. There's a difference between normal discomfort and genuine suffering.



COMMON PARENT WORRIES

YOUR QUESTIONS. ANSWERED CONTINUED...

Q: What if they don't make friends?

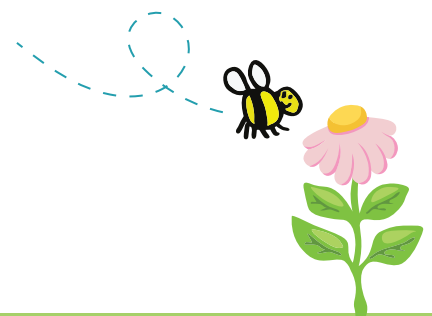
A: Camp counselors are trained to facilitate friendships. If you're concerned, mention it to the director—they can pair your child with a buddy or include them in specific activities. However, some kids are observers for a few days before warming up. That's okay too. Not every child leaves camp with a "best friend forever," and that's fine.

Q: Should I visit during camp?

A: Only if camp has designated visiting day. Surprise visits disrupt the camp community and can trigger homesickness in your child and others. If camp has no visiting day, it's for a reason—trust the process.

Q: What if our camp experience was genuinely bad?

A: It happens. Not every camp is right for every child. If something was truly wrong (safety issue, negligence, policy violation), address it with the camp director and, if needed, the accrediting body (ACA). Use it as a learning experience: "This particular camp wasn't right for us, but that doesn't mean all camps are bad." Try a different one next year, or stick to day camps if that's a better fit.



Find the perfect camp for your child:



CHECKLISTS & RESOURCES

YOUR ACTION PLAN

6 WEEKS BEFORE

- Read camp handbook together
- Start talking positively about camp
- Practice sleepovers
- Order name labels
- Complete medical forms
- Arrange transportation

2 WEEKS BEFORE

- Shop for any needed gear
- Start packing together
- Write letters to tuck in luggage
- Take "before camp" photos
- Confirm drop-off details
- Print packing list

DROP-OFF DAY

- Medications in labeled container
- All forms submitted
- Camera/phone charged
- Snacks for car ride
- Tissues for yourself!
- Contact info for camp

DURING CAMP

- Send mail (early!)
- Resist calling camp daily
- Plan something fun for yourself
- Connect with other camp parents
- Trust the process

PICKUP DAY

- Arrive on time
- Bring water/snacks for ride home
- Camera ready
- Thank counselors
- Get friend contact info

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Books for Kids:

- Superhero Summer Camp by Asaf Gitler (ages 6-10)
- Letters from Camp by Kate Klise (ages 8-12)
- The Parent Trap by Erich Kästner (classic, ages 9-12)

For Parents:

- American Camp Association (ACAamps.org)
- CharlottesvilleFamily Camp Guide: charlottesvillefamily.com
- Camp Parent Facebook Groups



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We're here to help make camp
a success for your family!

