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## The Meaning of Summer Camp

By NANCY GIBBS

I never went away to camp, even though--or maybe because--my father became president of the American Camping Association (ACA) when I was a kid. He liked to joke that my idea of camping was room service. I might have resented this had it been any less true.

I suspected it was time to send my daughter off to camp even before the day the power went out in our neighborhood and she and a hungry friend tried to roast a hot dog over a candle. Absent electricity, they spent the days making ankle bracelets and playing board games and writing a play together because no power means no screens, no iChat, no Sims. So I wasn't looking for some fancy culinary camp or robotics camp or whatever is fashionable now, just for someplace that teaches the appropriate interactions of sticks, weenies and flame. With no plugs.

Camps have always reflected children's dreams and parents' fears. In the 1880s, many rising middle-class families worried that industrial society had broken off some piece of the American soul, some tie to the frontier. Boys were growing soft: too much time with their mothers and their teachers, not enough manly activity. So the early camps promised, as a founder put it, to take "weakly boys out into camp life in the woods ... so that the pursuit of health could be combined with the practical knowledge outside usual academic lines."

Those first campers were wilderness tourists; today a wilderness is anyplace without bandwidth. I did send my daughter to tennis camp two years ago, but that didn't really count since it lasted five days and she was allowed to use her cell phone. This defies what I suspect is now the whole point of sleepaway camp: if 19th century campers were meant to retrieve lost survival skills--trapping, fishing, gunnery--21st century campers need to work on their social skills. The winter issue of Camping magazine noted that today's campers are often missing some basic interactive instruments; fantastically digitally aware, they are less familiar with the ideas of sharing their space, their stuff or the attention of the adults around them. For kids who are allowed to text during dinner, who have their parents on speed dial for whenever they get in trouble or need a ride, who communicate using more acronyms than a four-star general, a little autonomy is probably long overdue.

So I applaud the effort of traditional camps to pull the plugs: the ACA found in a 2007 survey that at least 3 out of 4 camps make kids leave their gizmos at home. It probably tells us something that the resistance often comes not from the kids but from Mom and Dad. Parents have been known to pack off their children

with two cell phones, so they can hand over one and still be able to sneak off and call. Camp expert Christopher Thurber reports that parents grill directors about why they can't watch their kids' activities from a webcam or reach them by BlackBerry. Services like CampMinder and [Bunk1.com](#) do let camps post news and pictures to "help our families to feel as if they are with us at camp," as a Texas camp owner puts it. But that just invites inquiry about why Johnny looks sad or how Jenny's jeans got torn.

Even as they yield in varying degrees to the demands of hovering parents, camps have all sorts of nice ways to tell us our kids need a break from our eager interest and exhausting expectations. Camps talk about building "independence," argue that having kids learn to solve their own problems and turn to peers and counselors for support is a key part of the experience. The implications are clear. They're lighting campfires, hiding and seeking, doing the spooky things campers do that feel wonderfully illicit if just because they involve getting dirtier than usual. Nothing to worry about, Mom.

I'm betting that more and more parents will find that our concern about kids' wired ways overtakes our desire to be in touch. I'll hate not talking to my daughter. But I agree with MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle, who says our gizmos are a "tethering technology," a new kind of apron string, strong albeit wireless, a safety net woven a bit too tight. When colleges report kids explaining their lateness to class with the excuse that their mother forgot their wake-up call, when a professor finds undergraduates communicating with parents more than 10 times a week, I look back on my once-a-week calls home to the parents I was very close to and wonder if this really counts as progress. Maybe it wouldn't be bad to practice distance, not just physical but psychological; let our kids take a walk alone in the woods, maybe do the same ourselves, and relish the fresh conversations we'll get to have when we are together again come summer's end.

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