



Photo by Harry Cutting

Camping or Just Chillin'?

Summer Choices for Your PreTeen

Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay:

Our 11-year-old son has gone to full-day summer camp since he was 6. Recently, he has been pleading to skip camp and stay home to “hang out” with a few neighborhood kids. We fear that a summer at home means excessive television, video games and complaints of boredom. On the other hand, some of my own fondest memories are my long summers spent at our neighborhood pool, doing nothing. I feel a little guilty not creating structure for the summer. When is doing nothing okay?

Dear Parent:

Some parenting decisions are truly about current values and trends. In my *Parenting Coffeehouse*, one of the take-home tools for more confident parenting is, “Know thyself, and know thy child.” Knowing ourselves means reflecting upon our values and goals, which means slowing down to listen and to think. Managing everyone’s needs requires that we ask a lot of questions and not make decisions in a blind fashion.

What values underlie your decision to send your son to full-day camp? What is it you hope he will gain? Why is camp a priority? Who can be home for your son? Is this camp a good “fit” for your son? Does the camp allow sufficient down time and choice for preteens? Can your son attend camp part-time?

Then there are more considerations related to "know thy child." Did you involve your son in the decisions regarding how his summer would be structured? Does he entertain himself well while he's home? Is he tired of this camp and ready for a new challenge? Did he get along well with others, and did he like his counselor? Are there any unresolved conflicts he left behind last summer?

Camp can be a place for socializing and for developing skills, such as archery or canoeing. Many young teenagers tell me that they love to go to camp, for a break from their parents and their school friends. And consider the fact that preteens are facing the challenge of further independence and growth, so some naturally yearn for a return to a more carefree childhood.

What about the notion of "down time" for young teens, at a time when parents believe their children must be scheduled in order to compete and to stay out of trouble? Imagine that it may be beneficial for young teens to luxuriate in their PJ's, watch some cartoons and lay around at the pool. Here are some thoughts for all of us to consider as we weigh out the costs and benefits of "doing nothing."

- Today's preteens live in a culture that is achievement-oriented and pressured. After a full school year of sports, projects due and a hurried household, cravings for a slower life are understandable.
- All of us crave "down time." It is necessary for rejuvenation. Slowing down to recover from, or to enhance, productivity is almost a law of nature. Recreation and rest refuel us so we can focus and be productive.
- We do not need to always rescue our children from boredom. Let them use their "boredom" to find things to do.
- It is not healthy for our teens to expect constant entertainment. As parents, we must take care not to set up a system of reinforcement that cultivates this expectation.
- Alternatively, some children appear to be unmotivated and need enormous support to initiate and adjust to new activities. Even so, parents face the challenge of finding a balance between respect for their child's nature and participation in activities that facilitate growth.
- If there are ways to be flexible with your work schedule, summer is a great time for family vacations and to join your children for "down time" around the pool or the backyard grill.
- If you live in a neighborhood that enables young teens to get together with adults nearby, there is great benefit for the goal of socialization and practicing independence.
- Parents who come together in a community to discuss their priorities for their children can organize resources, such as telephone trees, paid jobs, and/or co-op supervision.
- Many college students are home for the summer and could use a job. Think about hiring a college student to "man the fort" while you are at work.
- Don't forget the value of pitching in to help the family! Young teens can also be more helpful around the house during summer break, cleaning out closets, training the dog or washing the car.

More and more families are talking about slowing down and retiring from their overscheduled lives. Every moment counts, yet many teens become resistant or symptomatic when the demands are too great. For the 11-year-old who is pleading for a break, perhaps he needs a reminder about the benefits of camp or perhaps he is burnt out from a demanding sixth-grade year. The good news is that we can take any lessons learned from this summer to effect better plans for striking an even better balance next summer.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Montgomery County. Her mission is to bring psychology to the community through writing and public speaking. Please join "Dr. Kay" for her monthly "Parenting with Confidence" coffeehouse every second Wednesday of the month. Log onto www.kayabrams.com for more information and to register.

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