

Sleepaway camp gives kids a tech break, and might even save your marriage

By Wendy Sachs, Special to CNN

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The author's children, Lexi and Jonah Sachs, at camp

(CNN) -- While my kids mainline Instagram and feverishly text, update and Snapchat with friends, I count down the days until they go off the grid and the tech detox begins. This withdrawal from the sticky web of social media can't happen without intervention, and what I mean by intervention is sleepaway camp.

Murky lakes, blazing campfires and the bugle playing "Taps" over a scratchy speaker system conjure up the gauzy nostalgia many parents have for camp. The magic of traditional sleepaway camp, where kids rough

it in non-air-conditioned cabins, is that it serves up that old-fashioned buffet of swim, sailing, athletics, and arts and crafts. You can always count on the staples: totem poles, Color War and all. But perhaps most importantly, these camps have managed to keep the digital distractions away from tech-hungry campers.

Within the Wi-Fi free camp bubble, life is blissfully retro. Kids eat together around a table -- and wait for this, because they aren't clutching devices and tapping away all distracted and zoned out, they actually talk face to face and make eye contact.

Unshackled from electronics, kids' hands are suddenly free to pound on tables and make up ridiculous cheers and chants. There is no screen or app to filter or distort communication. There is no updating or posing for the cell ph, because there are no cell phones.

At Camp Mataponi, an all-girls camp in Naples, Maine, cell phones are collected on the bus ride to camp. A bucket of phones sits safely on a shelf in the camp office. Dan Isdander, the owner and camp director, says that parents of with their daughters to relinquish their phones before the bus ride, so the counselors have learned how to strategically search and confiscate the devices during the drive and when the girls arrive at camp.

[Independence day: For our children it can be summer camp](#)

"What's interesting is that the older girls tell us that they are very happy to check out and it's a big breath of fresh air to not have the pressure of having to keep up online or the fear that you are missing out," Isdander says.

"Overwhelmingly, the girls say they feel a sense of relief that every knows that they are off the grid."

Sleepaway camp has [been around for more than](#) and it has always been about discovering one's independence and creating lasting friendships while experiencing the great outdoors in all its kayaking and archery glory.

But in our uber digital, cyberparenting age, where parents are tangled to their kids online and off, and kids are tethered to technology, camp is more important than ever. It's the last refuge for kids to get the much-needed space they need away from devices and away from their well intentioned but suffocating parents.

In between games of Capture the Flag, Gaga and Ping Pong, the kids create connections with other kids and counselors. Experts agree that these real friendships, not superficial "likes" on Instagram or "friends" on Facebook, are the meaningful connections that are critical to a child's development.

"The relationships fostered at camp can have a tremendous influence on your child's life, particularly from other kids and camp counselors," says Michael Thompson, Ph.D., author of "Homesick and Happy: How Time Away from

Parents Can Help a Child Grow."

"The child-parent dynamic is so intense that kids sometimes need a different type of modeling," Thompson says. "Older campers and counselors are intuitive teachers, and much cooler to an 11-year-old than parents and they can hugely impact your child."

Camp people of is a gift for our kids. And trust me, it can be an absurdly expensive present at a whopping \$11,000 for some full-session camps. But camp is a gift for Mom and Dad, too. The breather you get, whether it's a couple of weeks or a whole summer without kids, can be a spiritual renaissance. It can also resuscitate marriages from the draining grind of contemporary parenting.

I know that there are folks who just don't get the camp thing. Perplexed if not appalled by the idea of shipping kids away, these parents assume that we are selfish, lazy parents who would rather play tennis and drink cocktails all day than entertain our children. I would say, you're partially right.

By the time the summer rolls around, we are exhausted and feeling selfish. Wiped from schlepping our overscheduled kids to an overload of spring sports and all those end-of-the-year recitals, we are craving a cocktail earlier in the day. We are ready for our kids to get their entertainment elsewhere -- and this, experts say, is healthy for everyone.

"There is a parent infatuation with the glorification of the child in American parenting right now -- I can't live without them and they can't live without me -- it's a bit much," says Thompson. "Camp lets kids develop on their own and gives parents a fresh perspective. It's a breather for everybody."

With [thousands of camps across the country](#), choosing the right . Full disclosure, I was certifiably obsessive in my quest for the right fit for my kids. Having decided on Maine, largely because the state feels campy and I went there, too, we still toured nearly two-dozen camps before deciding on the right ones.

My daughter was an enthusiastic little camper from the get-go and would have been happy pretty much anywhere, but my son was more anxious and not entirely on board. It took the encouraging support of a so-called Camp Lady to help our tireless search go smoothly.

Yes, there is a thriving cottage industry of professional camp people to help you filter through the plethora of options. Some Camp Ladies charge for their services, but many more are free and eager to find a camp that fits your price point and specifications. The Camp Ladies who don't charge a fee for their advice usually get a commission from the camp when you sign up.

I'm not going to lie; it's totally normal to have heart palpitations when sending your kids to camp for the first time. I hadn't slept more than the night before I first put my kids on a plane to Portland, Maine, . At the airport, the tears from my kids didn't help. They looked terrified and I felt nauseated. Those first few days can be torture.

As a culture, we've become addicted to instant communication and a constant stream of updates. Going cold turkey and cutting that cord at the camp bus or plane can send parents into a panic. Hang in there. Camp directors know this and cater to neurotic parents. Many camp websites are now virtual hubs of interconnectivity and camp directors usually call parents within the first day or on how your little camper is doing.

So this summer, get a great gift for every your kids for sleepaway camp. Even if you think you'll miss them too much to send them away, trust me, you'll get over it.