



# Focus on the First-Time Camper

By Cathleen Ann Steg

Illustration by Joel Snyder

**If your boy is attending camp for the first time this summer, you can help him build confidence and dispel worries beforehand.**

His hiking boots are broken in; the underwear's labeled; his travel toothbrush is tucked into a waterproof kit bag. It's your son's first week away at summer camp, and he's ready for adventure.



Or not.

"About 10 percent of children will have anxieties and worries about going away to camp," explains Dr. Richard Gallagher, director of the Parenting Institute at New York University's Child Study Center. Gallagher, also an assistant Scoutmaster with his own son's Troop 86 in Tenafly, N.J. ([Northern New Jersey Council](#)), believes that emotional preparedness is one of the keys to success for a first-time camper. Even the other 90 percent of children will likely have some fears to face during this first week away from Mom and Dad. How can a parent build confidence and calm worries?

## **SIT DOWN AND TALK IT OVER.**

Gallagher suggests that you talk to your child about his fears in a calm, rational manner. "Once you understand what his worries are about, you can help him to work through them," he explains. A child can be afraid, for example, that something bad might happen to him—or his family—when they are separated. Discussing the safety procedures available at camp, and the communication networks between camp staff and home, may help to lessen that concern.

## **SOMETIMES, THE ONLY THING TO FEAR IS BEING AFRAID.**

Occasionally, notes Gallagher, "kids worry just about the anxiety they are feeling, and they get even more anxious because the feeling upsets them. They can even start to exhibit physical symptoms such as nausea, just because of the fear of this fear." If your child shows this pattern, help him learn to relax and to calm his body. He will be more likely to enjoy his camp experience if he learns how to take a deep breath and then jump back into the fun of camp.

## **REMEMBER THOSE WHO ACT IN THE PLACE OF THE PARENTS.**

If first-time campers are attending camp with a troop, their unit leader might help alleviate anxiety by assigning a buddy to each new camper, said Bill Steele, director of Cub Scouting's outdoor program at the BSA national office. The leader might also alert the camp staff to this fact before the unit arrives. "Boy Scout camps are very tuned in to this; most have first-time camper programs," said Steele.

If the staff knows about your child's situation from the start, they will be in a better position to keep him occupied in a positive way. F. Kirk Dreier, director/naturalist at the Oregon Ridge Nature Center in Cockeysville, Md., speaks for most professionals who work to create happy campers, when he explains: "We try to reassure them and be as enthusiastic as we can. We involve everyone in the activities we choose."

## **THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT.**

Even if your child relishes the independence of a week away from home, he may still benefit from your help in certain areas. In almost 50 years of tent camping, for example, I have met with only one poisonous spider inside the tent (a black widow); the other thousands of arachnid invaders have been relatively harmless. Even so, many children who haven't spent much time in the wilderness assume anything on eight legs is lethal.

Birds and mammals rank just as high on the fright scale: Even the sound of a whippoorwill or the sight of a bat can cause panic in the sturdiest of campers. One of the scariest nighttime sounds, in fact, is the barn owl, "which screams instead of hooting," notes Brian J. Sedgwick, Scout program coordinator at Shaver's Creek Environmental Center of The Pennsylvania State University. "Here at Shaver's Creek, we show the kids that the scary sound they hear is coming from a small bird that is only interested in mice."

Reptiles have a bad rep, as well, so Sedgwick uses black rat snakes to teach children that some snakes are harmless and quite helpful. He even encourages children to touch these gentle creatures.

If you have an interpretive nature center in your area, take your child there before sending him to camp. Let a ranger show him the difference between a hairy-but-harmless wolf spider and a brown recluse. If you help him to recognize the friendly fauna, he'll be less likely to lose sleep when the inevitable platoon of daddy longlegs scabbles over his tent walls at camp.

## **BUT WHAT ABOUT THE BATHROOM?**

The only place spiders like better than your child's tent is the bathroom at his camp. Many children fear this building so greatly that they avoid showering for the entire week and rarely venture in even to use the toilet. Gaining familiarity with the creatures that cohabit the bathroom should help to relieve some anxieties.

Even so, some children simply can't bear the public nature of camp latrines. Oddly enough, the best advice to these children is to drink water and eat right. Explain the plain facts of nutrition to your child before giving him money to spend at the camp store.

Help him understand, for example, that caffeinated drinks are diuretic: They cause increased urination. Campers who choose soft drinks, coffee, or tea instead of water, milk, and juice need to go to the bathroom more often. In addition, those who eat poorly at camp, spending all their money on junk food binges instead of eating balanced meals in the dining lodge, often end up with serious stomach woes.

Part of the camp experience is for your child to make his own choices and to understand the meaning of independence. Advise him that, if he hopes to avoid those midnight visits to the bathroom, he would do well to choose his food and drink wisely all week.

But what if your child does need to visit the latrine during the night? "Finding the bathroom at night can be an anxiety," said the Cub Scouting Division's Bill Steele. "Make sure every camper has a flashlight, remembers where it is, knows the way to the bathroom with his flashlight, and knows not to try it without a flashlight."

## **FINALLY, AVOID FEAR ABOUT GEAR.**

First-time campers need not own high-tech, expensive equipment. Parents should refer to their camp's suggested packing list and keep supplies to a minimum. One of the best ways to help your child feel confident and comfortable at camp is by helping him select a simple, small daypack, in which he can stow all the most important morale-builders: water bottle, rain gear, flashlight, and a pair of clean, dry socks in a sealed plastic bag. With these few essentials by his side, day and night, your child will have nothing to fear.

*Contributing editor Cathleen Ann Steg wrote about getting new or "inactive" Scout parents more involved in ["All Aboard!"](#) in the September 2003 Scouting.*

## SUGGESTED PERSONAL GEAR FOR SUMMER CAMP

### NEEDED:

Completed Personal Health and Medical Record (i.e. physical exam form) w/ parent & physician signature  
Medication, if needed (prescription only) w/ current dosage/instruction label and scout's name/troop #  
Inhaler (i.e. asthma) or bee-sting kit, if needed  
Sleeping bag or 3 warm blankets and pillow  
Scout handbook (available in the camp trading post)  
Scout Uniform(s)  
Underwear (3 changes)  
Socks (4 pair)  
Sneakers (enclosed-toe shoes must be worn at all times for safety)  
Hiking boots (enclosed-toe shoes must be worn at all times for safety)  
Casual (work) shirts (2)  
Shorts and T-Shirts  
Pajamas  
Sweater or sweatshirt  
Windbreaker or jacket  
Raincoat or poncho  
Swim trunks  
Towel

Toilet articles, toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, metal mirror, soap in plastic container, shampoo, and deodorant  
Washcloth and hand towel  
Flashlight & spare batteries (available in the camp Trading Post)  
Extra shoe or boot laces  
Kleenex or handkerchief  
Insect Repellent (non aerosol type, the pump type has less flammable propellants, safer for the Scout, the environment and the water repellency of their tent)  
Back pack or pack frame  
Wallet and money for purchase of Trading Post items  
Scouts taking Swimming or Lifesaving merit badge, B.S.A. Lifeguard or the Pioneer Program should bring a pair of long pants, belt, socks & shoes, and a button up long-sleeve shirt for clothing inflation.

### RECOMMENDED:

Items may be needed if working on Camping, Cooking or Wilderness Survival or going on an overnight hike:  
Plastic ground cloth  
Eating utensils (i.e. bowl, cup, fork, knife and spoon)  
Canteen or water bottle  
Compass (available in the camp Trading Post)  
Jackknife (available in the camp Trading Post) and valid Totin' Chip card Note: If Totin' Chip is not yet earned, bring a knife in a plastic bag with the Scout's name on it and give it to a leader. We will provide more info on the other items in RED.  
Matches in waterproof case (flint & steel is available in the camp Trading Post)  
Personal first-aid kit

### OPTIONAL:

Fishing pole and tackle  
Prayer book, Bible or other reading material  
Musical instrument (if you can play "taps" on a bugle or trumpet please notify the camp office)  
Camera and film  
Sunglasses and sunscreen

Plastic bag with hand laundry soap  
Rope: 30' nylon cord  
Watch or alarm clock  
Deck of Cards  
Swim fins/face mask (for snorkeling)

### DO NOT BRING:

Fireworks, Cell Phones, Radios, CD/MP3 players, Electronic Games, etc. (although we may tolerate personal electronics on the bus ride that do not annoy other passengers, we are not responsible for the security of them and they CAN NOT be used while at camp, not even in your tent). Leaders will have FRS radios to safety purposes, Scouts should not bring theirs.  
Anything illegal, Scout inappropriate, or dangerous will be confiscated.  
Also refer to your Troop Notebooks for any additional information about gear.