Time away from us can help our kids grow

By Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

Parents say to me, “My daughter is a perfectionist. How can I help her not be so hard on herself?” Or “My children are sloppy. Why can’t I get them to pick things up?” These are tough questions to answer because, quite often, the mom or dad who asks them is not doing too little but is already doing too much.

For example, the parent who is trying to convince an anxious, perfectionist daughter that things are okay should not stay up until one in the morning keeping her company while she does her homework. And kids may never start picking up their clothes if their mother does it for them—especially if the trade-off is to simply tolerate mom’s familiar and not-all-that-scary anger.

Parents also ask me about more subtle problems such as how to help their children get over fears, learn to take risks and become more responsible. And often I ask them: Have you thought about sending your child to sleepaway camp? Have you considered that he or she may need to be away from you to take this particular developmental leap?

It seems to me that no matter how loving you are, there’s a limit to what you can and should do for your children. It’s going to take a child’s friend or perhaps an aunt, uncle, family friend or a camp counselor to give him or her the courage to grow in these ways.

What we would like to do, but can’t

In the final analysis, as parents, we simply cannot do everything we would like to do for our children. Kids have to do many things on their own and often away from us—sometimes overnight and sometimes for days, weeks or even months.

There are a number of fundamental things parents cannot do for their kids. We can provide guidance, of course, but we cannot accomplish what are essentially children’s developmental tasks.

Nor can we make our children happy or give them high self-esteem. We cannot make friends for them or control their friendships. We cannot successfully double as our child’s agent, manager or coach—or compete with his or her electronic world. We cannot keep our children totally safe, but we can drive them crazy trying. And we cannot make our kids independent.

Once you accept the idea that you cannot make your children independent, that you have to let them try things and fail, that they have to experience bore-

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Time away...
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dom, anger, giddiness and romance away from you to get the hang of it on their own, you are in a better position to appreciate what does happen to children when they are away from you and what they can make happen for themselves.

Why sleepaway camp?
When we see the tremendous gains in character and confidence that kids make outside of school and away from their families, it is clear that they benefit from a variety of away-from-home experiences including weekends with friends, overnight school trips or just about any situation where children sleep away from their parents.

I have focused on sleepaway camp—for a week, a month or all summer—because, for many kids, this is their first extended time away from home and perhaps their first bout with homesickness.

What I discovered by visiting a variety of camps is that family values are alive and well-lived by campers, counselors and staff. Camps evoke an earlier era in a community with family-style dinners, older kids caring for younger ones and meaningful daily rituals.

The magic of camp
Not all children love camp, of course. Some have an okay time and others hate it. But for most kids, the weeks they spend at camp become so vivid and life-changing that they are forever remembered.

Here’s what makes the experience so valuable for children.

- Opportunities for play, creativity and imagination.
- Camp is not school. No tests. No homework assignments. No grades.
- Character development. Feeling like they’re part of something bigger.
- A space in which children experience strong spiritual feelings, even in secular camps.
- Kids come home feeling more independent, confident and with higher self-esteem.
- Counselors share their wisdom, and kids teach their counselors patience, caring, communication and empathy.

“Childsick” and happy
Parents’ own feelings of longing for their absent camper can make any child’s homesickness even worse through constant efforts to make contact. I call this “childsick-ness,” and it’s a big challenge for camp directors these days.

My advice to parents is: Learn to let go.
Here are some suggestions to avoid suffering too much from childsickness or intruding on your child’s camp experience.

- Think of letting go as a gift to your child. This means accepting the reality that your kids are going to have a lot of fun that you will not see, photograph or share, and that they will discard forever some of their childish selves when they are away from you.
- Prepare your child for homesickness. Symptoms of mild or severe homesickness are universal. It doesn’t help to either hope or pretend that this won’t happen. Discuss the strategies your child can use to manage homesickness. Give him or her a chance to practice being away from home under favorable circumstances. Three or four successful overnights can give a child more confidence than any amount of verbal reassurance.
- Don’t make the “we’ll take you home if you’re unhappy” deal. If you do this before camp, you may well undermine your child’s chance of success. And you might even be creating an incentive for him or her to feel miserable.

Say instead, “We think you’re going to be able to conquer your homesick feelings and make a go of it at camp.”

- Help children practice skills they will need before they leave. Send them away for different kinds of trips before packing them off to camp: sleepovers with friends, a week with grandparents or an overnight YMCA or a scouting adventure.

- Use slower forms of communication. Letters and postcards are uniquely powerful in the lives of parents and campers. They can be read, re-read and saved for years. Some camps do allow parents to e-mail their children, but we send kids to camp to practice being independent. Frequent contact with parents undermines the sense of separation.

My advice: Forego the e-mail. Just send your child one or two packages, and stop checking the camp’s online photos.

- Take a vacation from parenting. Have some fun and don’t feel guilty about it. It doesn’t help your child’s camp experience for you to feel anxious and sad while he or she is away. Enjoy being proud that you have raised a child who can go away, make new friends, learn new skills and have a good time. You deserve the credit for supporting your child’s independence and for letting go.

The universal goals of parenting
At many points in our children’s lives, we need to step aside, ask other adults to take over and even send our children away to help them become more loving, productive, moral and independent young adults. For me, these four adjectives capture the central, universal goals of parenting.

You want to raise a child who can both find love in this world and show love to others. You want your child to make a contribution to society and to not break laws or exploit others sexually or financially. And you need for your child to be able to live without you and to not be a dependent burden on anyone else.

That is a reasonable description of what it means to be a responsible adult.

---M.T.
INTERCHANGE

Some ‘free’ apps can be expensive

We learned the hard way that one of the so-called “free” apps our daughter downloaded became very costly. She got caught up in a popular simulation game that just grew and grew. Our bill for her in-app buys was an unwelcome surprise!

—M.J., West Palm Beach

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Yes, those “premium” apps have become more and more prevalent and are a major source of revenue for app developers. Here are some tips from our friends at Common Sense Media for ways to prevent kids from racking up big bills with in-app buys.

MIND YOUR PINs AND PASSWORDs. You can require a PIN to make in-app purchases at the Android Market or Amazon Appstore. On iPhones, you need a password to download apps from iTunes. Keep your passwords to yourself.

TURN IT OFF. You can disable in-app buys entirely if you want to. Just use a restrictions passcode that your kid doesn’t know and can’t guess. Contact your mobile service provider to learn more about your options for restricting purchases.

GO WITH A GIFT CARD OR PREPAID CARD. This will allow your child to make purchases but not go wild. Letting kids know how much they have to spend should encourage them to budget wisely.

BE AWARE ALSO that some in-app buys are truly worth it. For $1 or so, an in-app purchase might allow kids to go “ad-free” on a game or activity they enjoy, and it becomes a better user experience. Another reason might be to give a small reward to the developer of an awesome, free app your child loves.

Other helpful in-app purchases can allow kids to progress past the intro phase or skip a difficult level of a game they really like. Just have a rule that your child will agree to check in with you first before buying anything.

RESEARCH REVIEW

Bilingualism boosts kids’ brain power

In our increasingly global world, it helps to speak two languages. And now, it turns out, being bilingual offers much more than a practical leg up. It has a powerful effect on the brain in areas not related to language—and it may even shield against dementia in old age.

New brain research has upended the conventional wisdom about bilingualism. Through much of the past century, a second language was thought of as an interference that hindered a child’s academic and intellectual development.

This view is apparently wrong on all counts. While it’s true that both language systems are active when only one language is being used, the interference is now being seen more as a blessing than a handicap.

By forcing the brain to resolve internal conflict, bilingualism gives the mind a workout that strengthens its cognitive muscles. The tussle back and forth between two simultaneously active language systems seems to improve aspects of cognition.

This starts to show up early. A study of bilingual and monolingual preschoolers by Canadian psychologists Ellen Bialystok and Michelle Martin-Rhee found that bilinguals were more adept at solving certain kinds of mental puzzles.

“Bilinguals have to switch languages often,” says Albert Costa, a researcher at the University of Pompeu Fabra in Spain. “You may talk to your father in one language and your mother in another. It requires keeping track of changes around you in the same way that we monitor our surroundings when driving.”

In other studies, bilingual children outperformed monolinguals on monitoring tasks and in their anticipatory powers. The bilingual edge continued on to later years and is especially pronounced when proficiency levels are high in both languages.

For example, in a study of Spanish-English bilinguals, neuropsychologist Tamar Gollan of the University of California at San Diego found that those with a higher degree of bilingualism were more resistant than others to the onset of dementia and other symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. The higher the degree of bilingual proficiency, the later the age of onset.

“Nobody ever doubted the power of language,” says science writer Yudhijit Bhattacharjee. “But who would have imagined that the words we hear and the sentences we speak might be leaving such a deep imprint.”

—Adapted from The New York Times

Sharp increase in number of twin births in the U.S.

If you think you’re seeing double more often, you are. More twins are being born than ever before, according to a new report from the National Center for Health Statistics. These days one in 30 babies born in the U.S. is a twin. The rate of twin births has risen 76% since 1980.

The increase is largely explained by the growing use of fertility drugs and assisted reproductive technology. And to a lesser extent, it’s due to the greater number of older women giving birth. In 2009, for example, 35% of births were to women over age 30, up from 20% in 1980.

The age-related increase applies only to fraternal twins however. The rate of identical twin births does not change with the age of the mother, says Dr. Joyce A. Martin of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, author of this new report.

Twins tend to be born earlier and are more likely to need hospitalization. And although they are at higher risk, most twins do fine in the long term, Dr. Martin says.
When is the ‘right time’ to move to senior housing?

By Peter Silin, M.S.W., R.S.W.

People often ask this question and there’s no easy answer. Speaking generally, there are two “right times” to think about an older relative moving to senior housing: one for the person receiving care and one for the caregivers. But all too often they don’t arrive at the same point.

Caregiving can be seen as a set of tasks required for daily living such as cooking, eating, shopping, cleaning, dressing, grooming, etc. Every caregiver has a level of tolerance for helping with these tasks. And while your family’s situation may look the same as someone else’s, it almost certainly is not.

Even after hiring a home care worker, many families reach a point where a move to senior housing becomes the most viable option for everyone involved.

Look for specific markers

There are some practical behavioral markers that suggest it’s time to look at other housing options for your older relative. These often include the following:

Is your loved one starting to become incontinent?

Is he wandering from home and getting lost? Is she so unsafe outside by herself that you have to monitor the doors?

Are his sleep patterns changing? Is she up all night? Is the caregiver’s sleep interrupted to the point where her or his functioning is affected?

Is your older relative resisting the care your family is trying to provide? Has he or she become aggressive with a caregiver?

Are you hearing the same question being asked over and over again?

Does she or he become anxious when you or another member of your family is not nearby? Is it difficult to go out and have some time for yourself?

• Is caregiving taking too much time away from my children and my marriage? Am I fighting more with my spouse? Am I trying to do it all myself without reaching out to my siblings or other family members?

• Have I neglected my friends and given up involvement in my community? What about hobbies and interests that I used to enjoy? Am I turning down invitations and opportunities?

Choosing senior housing

If the time has come for your older relative to make a move, step one is to educate yourself about senior housing options that are available and appropriate—and to visit them personally, ideally with other members of your family. You may find facilities that are better than you expected. But if you’re unhappy with what you find, you need to keep looking.

Senior housing is successful when it meets the needs of both the provider and its residents. One factor to consider is that any facility providing support services will have residents with cognitive loss. Residents either enter with this condition or, as they age, they become impaired.

A facility that accepts clients with dementia—or allows them to stay in the home as they become impaired—needs to have appropriate structures in place to meet those needs.

When your family is considering a move to senior housing, it’s important to be aware of present and future needs. Find out how residents’ needs will be met if they develop dementia or lose their sight. Is there a volunteer program? How many volunteers are there? How often do they come and what do they do?

Does the facility have its own vehicles for off-site trips and activities? How often are these available? Who can go?

—Adapted from the author’s column in the online newsletter Elder Voice, a publication of Diamond Geriatrics.
Single moms can bring caring men into kids’ lives

By Kyle D. Pruett, M.D.

Our children eventually learn the mystery of their beginnings. From their own early understanding of where babies come from, kids know they wouldn’t be here without a father. So they conclude there’s got to be one for them, somewhere. This holds true in circumstances of adoption, desertion, death or even assisted reproductive technology.

Benefits for everyone

By encouraging relationships with nurturing men, single mothers can make it easier for their children to deal with the absence of a father in their lives. And a male presence also lessens the pressure kids feel to be “all things” to their mom.

Children can also feel entitled to have relationships with both men and women—and to know that this is all right with their mother. Likewise, mothering is strengthened when a woman is spared the impossibility of being both mom and dad to her child.

I believe that the way single mothers feel about men in the life of their children is very powerful in the long run.

As kids grow up, it helps for them to hear increasingly detailed explanations of how they came to exist—and of what happened to their biological father. But the positive relationships that a woman has with men in her own life will teach her children even more than her words about men and masculinity.

Ideas for different ages

Here are some suggestions to help single moms ease children’s yearning for a male presence in their lives—ideas that will benefit both mother and child.

▶ During infancy. First, a new mom needs to take care of herself, especially if she is alone. Surround yourself with all the support you can find: physical, emotional, nutritional and spiritual. Invite male relatives and friends with whom you have a close relationship to hold, walk, rock, play with and stay with your baby.

Try to get men involved be-child. This is fun for girls as well as boys, and your male friends and relatives will enjoy it more than changing diapers.

Encourage these men to read to and comfort your child. Different caregiving styles are stimulating and fascinating to children as they spend more time in the “not-the-mother” realm.

Try to make childcare arrangements or find play groups in which men or older malesiblings are involved as staff members or regular volunteers.

▶ In the preschool years. Since this is the first great age of gender identification, boys are hungry for masculine role models with whom to practice being a guy. Girls are interested in exploring the power of their femininity on males, large and small. Either way, make hay while this sun shines.

Preschoolers can be away from you for longer periods of time and feel safe and have fun. Let them go for a few hours with your male buddies if they want to.

Reading is important to preschoolers, and men like to do things with children—so this is a natural. Choose books that depict men in a positive way, not as buffoons. You might also find a comfortable, competent volunteer to help a boy with toilet training.

▶ During primary and middle school years. This is a time when children are mastering skills in sports, the arts and educational pursuits. It is also a time when civil and civic skills are taught, and—fortunately for kids whose “fatherneed” is not otherwise being met—the job of fostering productive citizenry in the young seems to be granted to males more often than not.

Keep an eye out for male instructors or tutors. Seek out opportunities for male involvement through churches and organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters and 4H.

▶ During adolescence. Kids tend to share less with their parents at this age. Therefore, it’s important for them to have other adults in their lives with whom the channels of communication are open. And if some or at least one of those channels is masculine, that can be a great help for both sons and daughters.

The teen years are also a peak time when children are testing their limits. Clarifying your own expectations and guarding your kids’ safety is much easier to do in partnership with a male family member who knows and loves your children.

Extended visits with male family members and trusted friends can be especially helpful to teenagers as they explore their growing autonomy in safe, secure places. Bring friends to your house or along with you on a trip.

—from “Fatherneed: Why Father Care Is As Essential As Mother Care For Your Child.” The author is Clinical Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine (www.drkylepruett.com).
Mistakes aren’t all bad, if we learn from them

By Anne Perryman

If you’ve never made a major blunder on the job, maybe you are not trying hard enough. Seriously. Experts say successful people make more mistakes than unsuccessful people. They also have more successes and, in most situations, one great success can outweigh a dozen failures. Mistakes happen, to begin with, because we are human beings. They also happen when we venture into the unknown and have to take risks if we hope to accomplish something new.

We get points for trying

People who are willing to take a risk are usually thought of more positively on the job than people who are averse to taking a chance. The trick, of course, is to recover from our mistakes and learn from them. To that end, Colorado-based business development consultants Jimmy Calano and Jeff Salzman offer these suggestions.

✓ Don’t run for cover. If you accept your mistake and face it squarely, people will be more likely to support you. Don’t blame others or make a lame excuse. Even a good excuse won’t help much either. Instead, do what you can to put things back on track as quickly as possible and try to control the damage.

✓ Respond, don’t react. Don’t panic, at least not in public. Show the people you work with, and for, that you have the situation under control. If you have a meltdown every time something goes wrong, you’ll get the reputation as someone who can’t take the heat.

✓ Clear your head. When the atmosphere is particularly tense, leave the crisis environment for a few minutes, if possible. Walk around the block, listen to some music, lie down or do a relaxation exercise that works for you. This will put you in a better frame of mind to deal with the consequences of whatever happened.

✓ Ask yourself, “What’s the worse that could happen?” Don’t over-analyze your mistake. Instead, figure out how big a deal it actually is and how much it will cost in terms of time, money and your reputation. Ask yourself too: “A year from now, what will this mean to me, my work group and my company?”

✓ Show that you’re sorry. Don’t trivialize what happened. If your mistake upset other people, let them know that you feel upset too. It’s not a bad idea to tell your boss something like: “I know I messed up, and I want you to know that I’m sorry.”

✓ Say what you learned. Make sure your supervisor and co-workers know that you learned something from what happened. There are many ways to state this positively, and you can also use humor to let people know that you’ll “never make that one again.”

✓ Do something. Yes, it’s normal to feel somewhat paralyzed for awhile after you’ve “blown it.” Fight this. Get back in the game. Do something decisive, even if it’s minor, to show that you still have confidence in yourself.

✓ Reach out. Post-blunder, it may feel like everyone around you is thinking, “How could you have done such a stupid thing?” Talk to a trusted colleague, friend or family member to help regain your perspective.

✓ Look for the gift. With every mistake comes the gift of a message that you needed to hear or a lesson you needed to learn. Look for the lesson—and try to find some humor in your situation.

✓ Enlist the help of others. Mistakes are often made when people are trying something new and different. Or perhaps a rule changed, and you didn’t hear about it in time. It’s important for everyone in a work group to keep each other informed, to stop avoidable mistakes from happening. For example, if the report absolutely must be delivered by 5 pm, everyone involved needs to know.

How to learn even more

Some mistakes can actually be celebrated—if you learn something really important from them, such as a weakness that needs correction, says Alexander Kjerulf in his book Happy Hour is 9 to 5.

He cites a sign that hangs in the offices of Menlo Innovations, an IT company in Ann Arbor, Michigan: Make mistakes faster.

“They know that mistakes are an integral part of doing anything cool and interesting and the sooner you can screw up, the sooner you can learn and move on,” says Kjerulf.

Failure often has an upside

People like to say that “failure is not an option,” even when it is. A better way to look at failure is as a path to opportunities that would not have otherwise appeared. “Closing your eyes to failure means closing your eyes to these opportunities,” he adds.

Expecting employees to always be successful is counter-productive as well, says Kjerulf, because it puts a lot of pressure on people. And feeling pressured to do things perfectly can make a person hesitant to report bad news or even to close one’s eyes to signs of trouble. This is especially true when a worker is punished for making a mistake, he adds.

The management guru Peter Drucker famously suggested in one of his lectures that businesses should find all the employees who never make mistakes—and fire them, because employees who never make mistakes never do anything interesting.
Yes, those baby teeth need care too

Your child’s baby teeth do fall out, of course, but they still need to be cared for. A sound oral hygiene plan is important to kids’ health, and it starts a lifetime of good habits.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends brushing a toddler’s teeth at least twice a day, after breakfast and before bed. It also advises taking children to see a dentist by their first birthday or soon after.

Why so soon?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have reported an increase, for the first time in 40 years, in the number of preschool children with tooth decay. Dentists nationwide are seeing more and more preschoolers—from families at all income levels—with six to 10 cavities or more.

Tooth decay is often so severe that general anesthesia is used because young kids are unable to sit through a long dental procedure.

Dentists suggest a few reasons for the problem: endless snacking, juice or other sweet drinks at bedtime and the use of bottled water instead of tap water with fluoride.

So if you like the taste of coconut water, enjoy it. Just don’t buy into the hype that it has special healing properties.

And don’t confuse coconut water with coconut milk, which is made by grating and squeezing the white flesh of older coconuts (the water is absorbed into the flesh as the coconut ripens).

Coconut milk provides a lot of potassium along with other electrolytes—magnesium, calcium, phosphorus and sodium. And its calorie count is high (35 per teaspoon).

Dr. Man Wai Ng, dentist-in-chief at Children’s Hospital Boston, says she often hears parents rationalize their preschooler’s snacking. She recommends no more than four ounces of juice a day, brushing after a sugary snack and bacteria-killing Xylitol lollipops. Here are some more tips from About.com:

Don’t give toddlers a bottle when they’re going to sleep. The liquid can pool in a child’s mouth and contribute to tooth decay.

Avoid giving your child sugary drinks that promote cavities.

Limit snacks to one or two times a day, and cut down on the amount of sugary sweets offered at those times.

Make the transition from a bottle or sippy cup to a regular cup as soon as you can. This will cut down on the amount of liquid that collects around your child’s teeth.

If your tap water is fluoridated, use it instead of bottled water. If it is not, talk to your dentist about a possible fluoride supplement. Just be aware that the CDC recommends not giving fluoride to babies under six months and not using fluoridated toothpaste with children under two.

Start flossing as soon as your child has teeth. Floss sticks rather than string or dental tape may make it easier.

Don’t let your child use a utensil that was in someone else’s mouth. Saliva contains cavity-causing bacteria.

Remember, many toddlers are happy to have their teeth brushed and may ask to use their toothbrush whenever they’re in the bathroom. For those who are reluctant, make it more fun. Choose a toothbrush with your child’s favorite character or set up a tooth brushing chart.

What’s all the fuss about starchy vegetables?

Potatoes and beans are vegetables—technically. But it’s better to think of them as carbohydrates, because they are higher in starch and contain many more calories than non-starchy veggies, says dietitian Lynn Goldstein of the Weill Cornell Medical College.

High-starch vegetables include potatoes, legumes, winter squash, corn, green peas and parsnips. While these foods have their place in a healthy diet, they should be eaten in smaller amounts than non-starchy vegetables.

Goldstein recommends no more than one serving per day.

On the other hand, non-starchy vegetables are high in vitamins, minerals and fiber and low in calories, which makes them perfect to help maintain a healthy weight. And luckily, there are plenty to choose from: artichokes, asparagus, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, carrots, cauliflower, eggplant, green peppers, mushrooms, okra, snap beans, tomatoes and zucchini, to name a few. These too contain some carbohydrates, but far fewer than starchy vegetables.

How many carbs are too many? Despite the popularity of low-carb diets, completely cutting out carbohydrates is not only difficult to do, it can rob your body of important nutrients. Goldstein suggests that carbs should make up about 50 to 60 percent of your total daily calories.
How your child can grow from a camp experience

Practicing psychologist, author and school consultant Michael Thompson writes, “I believe that children are often capable of taking responsibility that their parents cannot imagine, and that many children do less well when their parents are watching or supervising them.”

Dr. Thompson says also that self-esteem doesn’t grow from “parental support” but from kids building skills themselves. And much of the growth in character and confidence that children exhibit takes place outside of school and away from their families.

The coauthor of Raising Cain and other important books on parenting, Dr. Thompson sees the summer camp experience as a perfect example of how kids can benefit from their time away from home. (See front page article.)

Drawing on his visits to camps all over the country, he says they’re one of the last places on earth that are reasonably free of electronics. And when you think about it, this opens up a huge amount of space for kids to relate to each other.

Family-style dining teaches patience, respect and cooperation. “You can’t manipulate your mother into making something else for you if you don’t like what is being served,” Dr. Thompson says, “and you can’t graze in the fridge later on in the evening.”

Camp rituals such as reading aloud to children are very special for the digital generation. Friendships often develop into powerful lifelong bonds. And there’s so much more.

On the challenging side, the author talks about what parents can do to prevent or lessen homesickness, how to know when kids are ready for the separation, how they mature away from home and ways to support their growth.

He identifies a malady called “child’sickness.” When it hits, parents have a hard time letting go and not interfering with their kids’ camp experiences. As in every section of his wonderful book, Dr. Thompson presents clear, cogent advice on how to deal with this issue.