

Ask the Experts

Compiled by Sascha Zuger



De'Bunking Camp Concerns

Q My middle-schooler is getting ready to go to camp for the first time. It seems like friendships at this age are in flux, to put it mildly. Is it better to lock her into her time away with friends who might be frenemies by then, or encourage her to make new friends and branch out by signing her up solo?

School-Aged

A Sending your child to camp for the first time can be exciting and seen as a marker in the birth of their emerging independence of adolescence. It is understandable for parents to feel apprehensive about the unpredictability and volatility of their social experience.

Tween, preteen, or preadolescence is typically a person 12 and under, although it can be generally defined as 10-13, or even the broader period from 9-14 years. Urban Dictionary has defined tweens as being “too old for toys, but too young for boys”. Whichever age your preteen falls in this range, tweens are in an important developmental period of transition, moving from the relative calm of late childhood to the chaos that evolves during adolescence. Included in this window of transition is psychological and emotional development. They are just beginning that path to self-identity and development of moral values that will march forward into their teen years. The importance of their knowing which “group” they belong to is being established. These connections define their identity and are the important building blocks to self-esteem. The element of being liked by friends is paramount for tweens. It is no wonder the dynamics and drama of friends that can quickly become frenemies occurs. In addition, emotionally, they are beginning to realize that the needs of others may have to come before self-interest. This is the time their social world becomes all encompassing and they lose their infatuation with their parents.

Despite their constant reminders that they will soon become a teenager, they have not yet cognitively or emotionally reached

a teenager's level of emerging need to be independent of family. As such, tweens can be encouraged to participate in group events, like camp, or volunteer organizations, where a social obligation to others is emphasized. Children between 9 and 11 are not as ego-centric as they were when they were much younger, and they do find pleasure in helping others. This could be a benefit to signing your tween up for a camp where she doesn't really know anyone. The prospect of this can likely cause anxious feelings. Anxiety is common in this age range as tweens develop real fears that replace the fantasy fears of childhood (think monsters and the boogie man). Self-consciousness about all the physical changes that go along with puberty, including its unwelcome side effects, such as excess skin oils that contribute to acne, all contribute to anxious thoughts about making new friends. Reassure her first and then focus the discussion around the opportunity for her to feel accepted in a new group that is involved in doing group projects and helping others.

If you do decide on a camp that will include her close friends, it can be an opportunity to help your tween stretch her emerging emotional abilities and focus on the new social connections involved in helping others and blend it with those friends she already knows. It would be especially crucial to help your tween understand that one of the purposes of camp is to participate in the activities, especially those that include a service to others, as a dual purpose to make new friends and do something worthwhile. This approach may help reduce some drama that might occur with close friends that are attending the camp.



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