preparing kids for camp

tips for parents on helping children to overcome worries and get the most out of camp

bring out her best.

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School camp can be the most exciting and memorable experience of a child’s school year. For many, though, camp can also be a daunting prospect. Fortunately there are many things parents can do to help their child through this mix of emotions, and ensure they get the most out of camp.

Being well prepared for camp is one of the simplest and most helpful things you can do to ease your child’s worry.

- Make lists of things to buy for camp (e.g. disposable camera, torch, new pyjamas) and things to pack.
- Keep routine in the lead up to camp. Keep bedtime the same on the night before camp, and don’t make changes to any medications right before camp.
- Get organised early and arrive on time to ensure you can have a relaxed and easy start to camp.
- Keep goodbyes cheerful – if you feel teary, save this until your child is out of sight. Cheerful goodbyes show your child that you are confident that they will cope.
- Expect tears - apprehension and worry are to be expected, and are typically short-lived, while the benefits of the experience of camp are enormous.
- Don’t make too many extra safety nets (e.g. promises to call or pick them up earlier). Children will tend to rely on these if they are provided, even if they could cope without them. Speak with their teacher about reasonably expected difficulties and reasonable solutions.
managing **worries** before camp

There are a number of strategies that can help minimise and manage worries in the lead up to camp.

**Talk about worries and problem solve**

Helping children to identify and describe anxious or worried thoughts is the first step to relieving some of these feelings. What are they worried might happen? What’s their biggest worry? Identifying specific worries enables you and your child to take practical problem solving steps. What could you do if it happened? Who could they talk to? What could they do to feel better? Also, encouraging your child to find their own solutions will help build their confidence in their own ability to cope when you’re not around.

**Be positive about camp**

Try to communicate positive messages about camp and your child’s ability to cope while away. Avoid telling them you’ll miss them. Instead you can let them know how much you look forward to hearing all about camp and seeing some photos when they get home.

**Have a practice night away**

If your child rarely spends time away from the family home, they may benefit from some practice sleep overs with relatives or friends.

**Prevent camp avoidance**

While not going on camp may relieve your child’s anxiety in the short-term, it makes participating in camps in the future much more difficult. This is why camp participation should be encouraged wherever possible. For particularly anxious children, full attendance may be asking too much. In this case, any involvement in camp, even just visiting for the day, should be encouraged and facilitated.

**Inform staff of any special requirements on camp**

Talk to staff early about any food allergies, medication, or special needs your child might have on camp. If you would like to speak with the Outdoor Education Coordinator, please contact Liesl Woods at lwoods@strathcona.vic.edu.au

**Familiarise your child with the camp destination and itinerary**

Look up camp maps and photos, or speak to students who went on the camp last year. Discussing the itinerary can help remind your child of fun activities to look forward to. Making a calendar of the camp itinerary to hang on the fridge can act as a visual reminder.
managing **homesickness** on camp

Regardless of whether nerves have been a problem for your child prior to camp, homesickness may arise while away. Planning ahead can help your child cope with this.

- **Pack a comfort item** (e.g. a family photo, a favourite teddy, or a familiar pillowcase).
- **Write a diary or a letter** – keeping a diary or writing a letter home can help relieve worries on camp. Letter writing also helps kids to feel more connected to home without needing a phone call or visit from Mum or Dad.
- **Plan for homesickness** – discuss a plan with your child’s teacher and decide together how you will manage worries if they emerge (e.g. will you call your child while away?). Making these decisions early will help set clear expectations for your child.
- **Who can they tell?** Brainstorm with your child about who they might turn to if they get anxious on camp. This may be their teacher, another member of staff or another student.
- **What can they do?** Discussing what to do when feeling anxious can help your child feel well prepared to deal with worries. Strategies may include talking to someone, going for a walk, taking some deep breaths, writing in a diary, or playing a game.
- **Use a positive frame** – anxious children tend to focus on the negative and all the bad things that might happen. Gentle reminders like ‘camp will only last ___ days, so you better take advantage of that time as best you can’ are helpful to switch your child’s focus to the positive, and show them that you are positive about camp too.
All children worry, however sometimes a child's anxiety can grow beyond what they, even with Mum and Dad's help, can manage. There are several signs that may indicate your child may need additional help in coping with worries:

- Anxiety or worry is preventing your child from enjoying normal life experiences (e.g. school activities, sport participation, friendships or family relationships).
- Worries and fears that are out of proportion to the actual situation (e.g. a real fear that something terrible will happen to Mum while away on camp).
- Excessive anticipation and preoccupation about future events that distracts the child from their day-to-day functioning (e.g. difficulty concentrating on homework because of worries about camp).
- Difficulty settling back into a normal state (e.g. frequent difficulty getting to sleep at night).

Any of these signs may indicate difficulty managing worries that may need additional support. Any concerns can be discussed with your child’s teacher or with School Psychologist, Kerri Rhodes.
Main Campus: Senior/Middle School & ELC,  
34 Scott Street, Canterbury

Year 9 Campus: Tay Creggan,  
30 Yarra Street, Hawthorn

Junior Campus: Mellor House – Prep to Yr 6,  
173 Prospect Hill Road, Canterbury

Tel: 8779 7500  Fax: 9888 5440  
E: registrar@strathcona.vic.edu.au  
www.strathcona.vic.edu.au