



Texas Parent to Parent

## Going to Camp: A Conversation about Letting Go

Rosemary Alexander, PhD, TXP2P Transition Coordinator

I believe in the process of letting go of our children with disabilities, and I think that sending them to summer camp is a great way to start!

When my son Will (now age 29) was 6 or 7, I learned about Camp CAMP from another parent and thought, Will would like that—swimming, archery, canoeing, horseback riding, other kids, and lots of support to do these activities. So we signed him up for a week the next summer. It was tough to leave him that first time, wondering if they would be able to keep him from falling down, if he'd sleep and eat normally, if he'd have fun, if he'd have a seizure. I didn't get a call from camp that week and when we picked him up on Friday, I learned that it had gone well. He had a skinned knee but otherwise seemed happy and healthy. He is not verbal but his camp counselors had written about each day in a little notebook. And he won an award for having the biggest smile!

That was the start of a long tradition of Will going each summer to camp—an adult session was added so he still goes. He always has fun and wins an award—this year it was for having the best sense of humor on his adventures! Oh, sure, goofy things have happened, like the year he came home in another kid's shoes instead of his own! We've lost sheets and towels, shorts and swim suits; he's had skinned elbows, gotten a bit pink, and come home tuckered out. But truly these mishaps have been a small price to pay for the fun he's had and the people he's gotten to know.

And I started looking forward to that one week per year to spend on my own stuff—that first year I cleaned out closets! We've taken trips, devoted time to our other son, renewed our marriage, and just loafed. It feels like a miracle, after spending your life caring for another person, to finally have some time for yourself.

Will's going to camp gave both him and us the chance to learn that he could spend time having fun and being safe away from us. Other people can provide his care and do it well—maybe not the way I would do it, but in a way that works. Also we discovered that other people can provide experiences for him that his family cannot. And camp and other similar experiences paved the way for his eventual move into another household when he turned 20.

Letting go doesn't mean shirking our responsibilities of advocacy, care, and providing for our children's needs. Letting go does mean adopting an attitude that conveys to your child his or her right to make choices, become someone outside of your expectations, and step into adulthood without fear. It is also an attitude that gives yourself, as parent, the right to your own life, placing yourself first sometimes and pursuing your own goals.

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I love Will and take great delight in our time spent together, and I am proud of the skills he has acquired through maturity. I also relish the time and energy I now have to spend on my own interests and pursuits. I have learned to trust others for his care.

Letting go is best done GRADUALLY! Start early and keep at it, for it takes a long time. It may be hard to take that first step and trust your child to go somewhere without you, but you can start with something shorter than a week at camp—maybe just an overnight in a camp respite program. Let your child start to make choices, take small risks, and spend time with people outside your home. That first step starts the process, so that when your child arrives at adulthood, you are both ready!

NOTE: Rosemary has worked with TxP2P since its inception but has now joined us in developing our Pathways to Adulthood Transition Program and will be writing an article in each newsletter on transition issues.

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