

Growing Up and Going Camping

By Are We There Yet



Photo credit: George Heyer

Girl Guides wilderness camping - the excitement builds:

Every day for weeks I've heard the same thing. "We're so ready, we can't wait, this is going to be the best! We're going camping in the wilderness without you, we're so not going to miss you at all, we're so excited, don't worry, we're not going to miss you at all!"

This morning my younger daughter said quietly when she woke up, "I think I'm going to miss you."

The night before we leave the next morning:

"Is dinner ready? I'm starving!"

I sit there staring at my older daughter, not sure that I've heard right. I've just spent the entire afternoon at their sides, running back and forth from the washing machine to get stuff to pack, going over the check-list, then going over the check-list again and again to make sure they haven't forgotten anything as my younger one keeps pulling things out of her bag as I put things in her bag.

Growing Up and Going Camping

“No,” I answer slowly, “I haven’t started dinner yet, I’ve been here with you guys getting everything ready.”

“But how can that beeeeeee??? We’re starving, what do you mean you haven’t even started it yet!”

“I’ve been here packing with you.”

“How could I have known that, that’s not fair!!!”

I decided to leave the logic on that and suggested, “Let’s go make dinner together, it’ll be faster.”

“What?? Oh no, I can’t do that, I’ve got too much to do, look at the time, we’re never going to get enough sleep, we’re going to be totally wrecked tomorrow, how are we ever going to be able to do anything, we need to be asleep in an hour and we haven’t even eaten yet, which we can’t do because you haven’t even made dinner and it’s so late!”

“It’s only six o’clock.”

“How can it be only six o’clock, it’s so late, you’re just not trying to help and I have to do everything!”

Apparently, me driving them around for two weeks to every place imaginable trying to find affordable gear, organize it, wash it and pack it disqualifies me from having done anything. It’s definitely not the time to bring up the logic on that one, either. I stop everything, we all go make dinner together and eat outside on the balcony. Whereupon they declare how lovely and peaceful it is at home.

In the car on the drive up to camp:

“We’ve been driving for so long, oh my gosh it’s so long, don’t you think it feels like a giant road

Growing Up and Going Camping

trip?” The words come tumbling out of my older one as she speaks to her sister, both of them jumping so hard the car is bouncing.

“I know,” my younger one shouts back, as loud is the only volume choice when excited. “This is a big trip, I’ve already taken off my shoes and my socks and my sweater, look I got out some games for us to play.”

“Haven’t we been driving for sooo long?”

I inform them we’ve been on the highway for ten minutes.

“Yeah, but it’s so far!” they shout back in unison.

“Do you think we’ll see each other, do you think we’ll be in the same group?” my older one asks her sister. “Imagine if we were in the same tent together, that would be so cool. Oh no, wait, that wouldn’t be cool.”

“No, we wouldn’t want that at all!” says her younger sister, looking shocked at the idea. “No, we don’t want to see each other for real, we just want to see each other a little bit. Like from far away.”

“Oh yeah, that would be so cool. If we saw each other from really far away, like across the lake or something.”

“Yeah, then we could just look at each other, but look at each other really quickly, and then just do like a quick wave.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Let’s just look at each other from far away and then do a really quick wave.”

“Ok, let’s practice our quick waving.”

Growing Up and Going Camping

Arriving at camp:

I sign in my older one with her group. As I'm signing in my younger one, my older one comes over. "Ok, I'm leaving now, bye," she says matter-of-factly.

"What do you mean, you're leaving now?" I ask her.

"That girl is going to show me the camp."

"What girl, where? We just got here five minutes ago, we don't know anyone."

"That girl over there. Her mother's one of the camp counsellors, so she's going to show me the camp."

"Well hold on, can you wait a minute, I'm just signing your sister in, I want to say goodbye."

"No, that's ok, I'm good," she said. And she left. My mouth dropped open, but no words came out.

I finish signing in my younger one and wait with her while the other campers and families arrive. My older one comes back. She walks over to me and leans in closely, whispering hurriedly while looking around to see if anyone is listening.

"I just saw the camp. There's no showers. You have to jump in the lake to get washed. There's an area for eating, and then there's the tents. I think I'm going to be pretty smelly." She looks around again to see if anyone is watching, gives me an awkward hug, pulls back and says with a smile huger than Christmas morning, "Bye Mama, see you in a week."

And she bounced down the path.

The younger one had stepped aside to watch the rest of the kids arrive. I move close to her to say, "I love you" and hug her. She stares at me, horrified.

Growing Up and Going Camping

“No, Mama, please!” she says in a loud, panicked whisper. “Don’t hug me, whatever you do, don’t hug me!”

“But I want to say goodbye and have fun!”

“No, Mama, not that! It’s ok, I’m fine!”

I hug her anyway. It’s the emotional equivalent of wrapping your arms around a concrete pillar. She steps back and furiously whispers, “No, I’m fine! Really! Ok, love! Bye!” And starts talking with her friends. The ones she never saw before in her life not ten minutes ago.

I walk up the dirt path and climb the grassy hill. I stand there a long, long time and watch as the groups form and the camp counsellors magically get everyone talking and involved. I watch as the groups walk away and the field, which was filled with excited girls all talking and moving at once, empties as they leave to begin their wilderness adventure.

I drive home in silence. It is a strange silence. It is not the quiet of being alone, but the silence of my thoughts. I’m used to having hundreds of thoughts simultaneously collide in my head with three different schedules, both theirs and mine, while I try to figure out how to do everything. But now there is nothing. No other schedules. There are no thoughts in my head, just emptiness. When my kids walked down that forest path, my thoughts, and myself, walked with them.

I got home and didn’t know what to do. I had visualized this moment for weeks. My time of freedom, their time of freedom, a moment of growing and independence for all of us. Instead I found myself obsessively staring at the weather report where the camp is, unable to do anything else. The weather report, my only connection to them.

It has been fourteen years since I have been alone. I have been looking forward to this moment, of having one week where I could be just me, and only me. Not all three of us at once. Not everything, to everybody, all the time. But now that I have this moment, I realize that I am not

Growing Up and Going Camping

the same person I was fourteen years ago. I am no longer just me. I am also them. And for them to be themselves, I need to let them go and grow. I turn back to the weather report. And wonder what being me means now.

When they come back, within seconds they will hand-deliver their personal style of chaos. Everyone will talk loudly, all at the same time, and all demanding to be the centre of attention for every ten-minute story that takes two hours to tell. I will love it.

And then as the chaos builds and I am slowly driven crazy, I will wonder when the next camping trip is, and why I didn't take more advantage of my week off. In the meantime, I've grown to love the weather channel.

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