



Camp care package: What to send tweens and teens

By BETH J. HARPAZ
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NEW YORK — My son sent a single postcard home his first time at sleep-away camp.

"Send a juggling ball and fun toys," was just about all it said.

This year I pledge to send the best camp care package ever, including not one, but three juggling balls, which seems like the right number if you actually plan to juggle.

But what else qualifies as a "fun toy" for a kid in middle school or high school? Here are some ideas for what to send tweens, teens and teenage counselors at sleep-away camp.

Rubik's Cube, yo-yos, playing cards, Frisbees, super-bouncy balls, flip-flops, prank toys, graphic novels, comic books, novels, joke books, wristbands, headbands, ponytail holders, hair clips, new socks, toiletries and after-sports wipes are all possibilities, depending on your child's interests (though some of these items assume a level of personal hygiene not always observed at sleep-away camp).

If kids are hiking and camping out, consider a compass or windup flashlight. Some parents send individual powdered drink packets to improve what one mom described as "yucky camp water."

Many camps ban junk food, and some ban all food from home. "Parents need to be partners with the camp program," said Peter Surgenor, president of the American Camp Association. "If the camp says no candy should be sent because they live in tents and animals can get in, parents shouldn't counteract that."

Of course, no parent wants bears to go sniffing out kids' backpacks. But what about no-food rules for regular bunkhouses?

"We used to obey the rules about food being sent to camp and then found out on parents weekend that my child was the only one in his bunk not getting candy set to him," New York City mom Jill Dube said, echoing sentiments from many other parents.

So Dube sent Mentos, Swedish Fish and powdered Gatorade, along with sugar-free gum and a hard plastic container to stash the goodies.

Worried about junk food? Consider healthier snacks like dried fruit, nuts, or trail mix.

If you do send edibles, send enough to share. "You don't have to share food you receive, but you become very popular if you do," said Becca Logan, a 17-year-old soccer camp alumna from Hurricane, W.Va.

For nonfood items, Becca suggested fake tattoos, sunglasses, fingernail polish and hair accessories. "Girls usually end up going into one person's room and doing each other's hair and nails," she said. "They might also want water balloons and Silly String for the battles with the boys or attacks on counselors."

Becca also pointed out that "it's not a good idea to send family photos. If a kid is homesick, it will only make them worse, and if they're not homesick, they just won't want it."

Alexandra Manolis, mother of three from Piedmont, Calif., suggested lip gloss, bandanas, "a new-old T-shirt," and magazines. Manolis describes herself as a "lifelong sleepaway camp junkie who went to camp at age 8 and never looked back."

She added that "magazines are always good for counselors to connect with the outside world. The sports page, too, because when you are at camp you are in your own world."

Depending on your teen's interests, try Sports Illustrated, Seventeen, Teen Vogue, Lucky, People or Us Weekly. Magazines and comic books are also easy to pass around the bunkhouse or flip through with friends.

If you dread store-hopping and post office visits, many companies sell and ship readymade care packages.

Box-O-Box was started by a couple of 20-somethings who thought their own parents' care packages were "ho-hum," as co-founder Mike Hauke, 28, put it. "We told our parents in college, please stop sending them. We decided to create something not boring, that would have kids saying, 'Mom, you are the coolest!'" Focus groups with parents and students help fine-tune the packages.

Box-O-Box has several themes to choose from, priced at \$40-\$50 plus shipping. The Box-O-Box Web site describes the packages as "entertaining, quirky, and ultra-hip for tweens-teens and college kids ... like sending a party in a box."

I can think of a few things that happen at teen parties that I'd rather not be sending supplies for in a box. But the Box-O-Box "Box-O-Camp" package that I checked out contained nothing more dangerous than Silly Putty and a Slinky.

Several folks suggested sending Mad Libs, real or made-up.

"When I was a counselor, I had moms send their kids a form letter so they could fill it out quickly," said Meghan Gamber, a publicist in Los Angeles with Rogers & Cowan. "They were 'Mom Mad Libs' essentially, a la 'My favorite trip so far has been ...' and 'I've been playing a lot of ...'"

I'm not sure my wiseguy kid would go for those. So Gamber provided a few more fill-in-the-blanks to appeal to snarky campers: "I've had ... mosquito bites so far. The food here is ... My counselors are ..."

I could see my son answering those. Then again, as his mother, maybe I'd rather not know.

Beth Harpaz is the author of several books including "13 Is the New 18."