

A letter to my child's staff person . . .

by Michael Brandwein

How strange it is that I've never met you and in a few days you will become the most important person in my life.

I suppose you've been told that already: "These are other people's children — their most cherished loved ones; they'd actually give up their own life before they would let anything terrible happen to them . . .," etc., etc. But I hope that you don't think it's strange if I take a few moments to write down a few things that I would want you to know. Oh, sure, there are those official camp forms where I can tell you that my son or daughter is allergic to a rare kind of wallpaper paste, loves volleyball but not when it's cloudy {please keep an eye out for that}, or has promised the parole officer not to set any more of the big fires. I wanted to take a few extra moments to tell you some things that don't really belong on a form.

I've been thinking a lot the last few days about baby-sitters. Whenever I hire one to look after my child, I interview them. I have the chance to meet them, ask them things, and watch how they interact and play with my child and how my child responds to them. I can personally talk to people for whom they've worked before. And I've thought about school: I get to meet the teacher before it starts.

But when a parent sends their child to camp, odds are they've never met the people who will stand in the parent's place. If I understand right, at some camps you don't even know the counselor's name until camp actually begins. I just wanted to tell you that all of this is scary.

Please don't be insulted. I trust the director who hired you and would never think of sending my child unless I did. If the director trusts you, then I trust you. But I know that the director is not going to be taking care of my child personally. You are. And I just wanted you to know what an extraordinary act of faith it is for me to put *my* child into *your* arms. Please hold my child carefully.

I'm sending my child with all of the things that the camp letter said to include. I feel absolutely certain that I've forgotten something and I have this fear that my child will be the only one without it, whatever it is.

I can still remember when my little brother and I went to sleep-over camp in Wisconsin. Our second summer we showed up for only the second four week session. We didn't know that no one did that, and that we'd be walking into a place where everyone already knew everyone else. We showed up proudly wearing our official camp T-shirts, the only kind we'd brought. Unfortunately, no one had told us that these shirts, which were considered the height of coolness our first summer, had been declared the depths of dorkiness for the second summer. When we arrived it was dark. I remember being very grateful for that. Everyone was in the dining hall watching a movie, so we snuck into a corner, away from the stares. I don't think I've ever felt so alone.

And then I remember the first counselor who smiled at me. Who asked me lots of questions about what I liked to do. Who really listened without interrupting or correcting. I must have talked for three or four minutes with him just smiling and nodding at me. I kept waiting for him to interrupt or something. *Four minutes!* That was a personal record. It had never happened at home. I liked it. I liked it a lot. And then the box of regular, ordinary, no dorky-logo shirts arrived in an emergency package from mom and dad. Things got much better after that . . .

There were a few other things I wanted to tell you: I don't expect you to be perfect. Heaven knows *I'm* not. With any luck, maybe heaven *doesn't* know I've brought my child up the best way I know how and I know I've made mistakes. I keep trying to learn how to do it better, and just when I think I've got this parenting thing down, my child grows older, changes considerably, and sends me back to the drawing board to figure it all out again. But I have learned one thing: if you don't know, *ask*. Read. Watch others. Invite help. I have a lot of good friends who I talk to all the time about raising my child. I'd hate to think you were suddenly trying to do this on your own when *I* can't do that myself.

Please know that my child is not perfect either. I'm hoping that you will forgive just as you would like to be forgiven yourself, and that when my child does something that isn't right, that you will focus on helping to show what should be done better the next time. In other words, just treat my child exactly as you will want to be treated if you mess up.

I know you've got a lot of children to take care of. They are all important.

I hope very much that you find something special about mine. I don't mean better. I just mean something unique that sets my child apart as a valuable individual.

You see, I love my child very much. And I tell my child that every day. But the problem is that I've raised a reasonably smart child who figures that it's my job to say "you're smart" and "you look great" and "people really think you're terrific." From time to time my child must wonder if I say these things because they're really true or because I'm *supposed* to say them.

Wouldn't it be great if my child met you, a complete stranger, and you discovered valuable things in my child all on your own? See, if YOU find and talk about these positive things, my child can say, "Hey, people notice that I've got good things inside of me. I guess maybe I do"

So I've sort of ended where I began: talking about strangers. Ironically, the very fact that you are a stranger to my child gives you, in some ways, even more power than I have.

And one final thing: sometimes when I write my thoughts down I understand them better. When I started writing this letter I didn't really see this, but I do now:

It just occurred to me: If you care for my child with love and patience and skill, then you're no stranger. You've suddenly become my most important friend in the world.

Thank you, friend. Have a most wonderful summer!

A Child's Grateful Parent