

The Happy Camper

Bestselling therapist Dr. Wendy Mogel tells us why we need to send our kids to camp

BY MINDY SCHILLER

SPECIAL TO THE WORLD JEWISH DIGEST

Dr. Wendy Mogel tells the story of a friend of hers, a college placement counselor at a posh East Coast prep school, who picked up the phone in her office to hear the voice of a father returning her call. She had wanted to discuss his daughter's final list of colleges to which she would be applying, but suddenly, she noticed an odd sound in the background.

"What's that noise?" the counselor asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," answered the dad. "I can talk. I'm just doing a colonoscopy."

The counselor was dumbstruck. "I don't feel comfortable continuing this conversation. I'll call you back later."

While the above exchange—related by Mogel in a February 2006 issue of *Camping Magazine*—might sound extreme, it wasn't all that shocking to Mogel, a clinical psychologist who had spent 15 years treating children before she realized that many of their problems had nothing to do with psychological disorders and were, instead, the result of over-indulgent and hyper-involved parents. Tired of listening to complaints about obnoxious children, nightly bedtime battles and exorbitantly expensive private tutors, Mogel knew that parents and children were both chronically unhappy. Feeling as though her training was failing her, she consulted with experts, entered therapy herself and continued to hope the problem would go away. It didn't.

One day, however, something happened. A friend of Mogel's invited her to Rosh Hashanah services at a Los Angeles synagogue. Mogel, who jokes that her family's Jewish rituals totaled five hours a year, said yes—on a lark. Several hours later, she found herself sitting in the sanctuary crying. "I'm not an easy cry," she writes in her bestselling book, "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children," "so I was puzzled. Something had been stirred in me, but I didn't know what it could be." Anxious to find out, she returned for Yom Kippur Services and attended a different synagogue closer to home the Shabbat after.

It was while listening to a section of

Exodus that Mogel found the answer she'd been looking for. One of the verses brought to mind the concept of sacred and profane—delineated boundaries—and she realized suddenly that what her patients needed was not a new psychological theory. They needed boundaries. Limits. A sense of authority.

Mogel became so interested in what Jewish texts had to teach parents about parenting that she decided to take a year's sabbatical and do nothing but study. It wasn't long before that studying grew into teaching, which grew into a bestseller. These days, Mogel divides her time between lecturing across the country—mostly to non-Jewish audiences, ironically—and writing her latest book, "The Blessing of a B Minus," due out in February 2009 (Scribner). "I tell parents that it's good for kids to be bored, unhappy, disappointed and confused ... to be cold, wet or hungry for more than one and a half seconds before they graduate from high school," writes Mogel in *Camping*. Otherwise, before we know it, "our children will be suing us for stealing their childhood."

So, in an effort to give children back the childhood they need for healthy character development, *World Jewish Digest (WJD)* caught up with Mogel to discuss what she considers to be one of the best ways to do just that: sending our kids to camp.

WJD: What are the benefits of going to camp?

Wendy Mogel (WM): Being away from the nervously loving, watchful eye of parents. Meeting kids you're not with every day. Learning how to tend to your own emotional, physical and spiritual health. Camp is a brilliant antidote to our tendency to overprotect, overschedule, overindulge our kids; and to expect them to be little academic soldiers, good at every single thing they do—even if they have no talent in that area. Camp is a recipe for the opposite to all of those things.

WJD: Would you say that the next step is boarding school? Is that even better than camp?



Mogel uses Jewish teachings to educate parents on child-rearing. Her next book, "The Blessing of a B Minus," will hit shelves in 2009.

COURTESY OF DR. WENDY MOGEL

WM: That's a really interesting question. Not necessarily. I think boarding school is great for some kids. But family life has wonderful elements if we discipline ourselves as parents to go against the cultural flow. If you're at home instead of boarding school, you can have dinner with your parents and talk to them and learn their values. You can have Shabbat. If you're away all year

round, parents don't get to bump up against the kids—and kids against the parents—in a very potentially exhilarating and character-molding way.

WJD: You talk about how we indulge our children. That would seem a backlash from the way it used to be—'children should be seen and not heard.' Is

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this a phase or is it permanent?

WM: I don't think it can be permanent because it's harming the kids. [And] I don't want to say it's just indulgence because it's really a combination of indulgence and exploitation of kids. We're asking them to do academic work that their little central nervous systems and cognitive development are not ready to do. We're asking them to do college work in high school and high school work in middle school and that's not indulgence. Which is another reason I like camp. I think there is a growing awareness of the consequence of creating what I call 'handicapped royally.' That the kids are entitled but anxious. And when they go off to college, they're not able to manage themselves independently. Which is why camp is good. It's a little practice.

WJD: What age do you think is appropriate to send a kid to sleep-away camp?

WM: It really depends on the kid. I know parents who send their kids at 6 or 7, [where] camp is kind of a family experience. But most families? Somewhere around 10, 11, 12. Some kids are not ready till they're 14. There isn't an age. It's maturity and desire.

WJD: And what if the kid doesn't want to go at all?

WM: It's really good for parents to kind of poke around and see why. Sometimes kids have fears that aren't grounded in anything. You know, 'I've heard at camp you have to take cold showers,' or 'I'm afraid I'm going to be so homesick.' It's good to find out what the child's reasons are, but I don't think

every child has to go to sleep-away camp.

WJD: Let's say your kid is at camp and having a really tough time. Should you let them rough it out or should you intervene?

WM: A good way to approach a big camp experience is to start with a one-week sleep-away experience close to home. You don't have to send them from California to Maine for eight weeks to start out. Start gently and build up from there. The administrators of summer camps recommend against making what they call a 'pick-up deal.' Which is to say, 'I want you to go to sleep-away camp,' and the child says, 'Yes, I want to go, but if I'm homesick do you promise you'll pick me up and take me home?'

I always want the family to work directly with the administration—either at camp or at school. Because we have lots of issues these days with bullying at school, these girls are leaving me out and won't eat lunch with me ... and I always want the parent to listen very compassionately to what kids say, but not take it at face value. They may find out that even though the child's crying, three minutes [after the parent drops them off at school], they're laughing and having a ball. Something at camp. I always want to make a good triangle with the counselor and administrators and the parents putting their heads together and figuring out what the child needs, instead of the parents and the child kind of aligning against the camp or against the school. [Plus], some kids never need to go to sleep-away camp. They can go to day camp, and they can be a day-camp counselor.

WJD: What kind of a kid would that be, do you think?

WM: It might be a really shy kid. A kid who doesn't love group activities. The

idea to anyone today that a child might be shy is almost like the child is a criminal. The child has a lethal disease. Not everybody has to love group activities. Some people just don't. They're artists. Or they're solitary. And there are all kinds of wholesome activities for them to do in the summer as well. We always think bigger is better. So the biggest summer experience is a sleep-away experience. Which is great for some kids and not right for others.

WJD: Where in the Jewish texts do you think you would find support for this kind of thing?

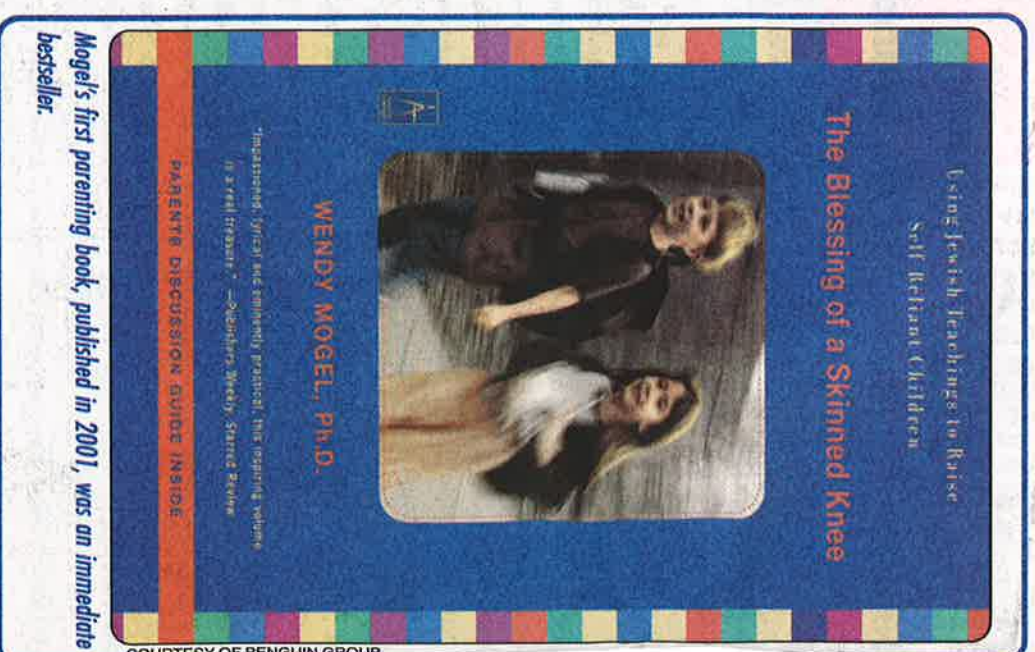
WM: Well, one is that every parent has an obligation to teach their child how to swim. That's in the

Babylonian Talmud. And that covers all of this. Because you actually do learn to swim at camp. And the rabbinic interpretation of that is that we're raising our children to leave us. And they need skills. But the other [source] is the beautiful Hasidic teaching that if your child has the talent to be a baker, don't ask them to be a doctor. So don't ask them to play in a 'rough and ready' camp situation if you have a sensitive, artistic-type child. Another [source] is Leviticus 19:14. Don't put a stumbling block before the blind. So, don't send them too young or send them too far. Also, don't violate with every emotional distress they have as though it's an emotional catastrophe. Homesickness is part of camp.

WJD: What about these very fancy summer camps? These flashy internships? I'm afraid they play into the whole overscheduling thing.

WM: I completely agree with you. I call it "resume-pimping." Again, the parental intention is good—to give kids a rich range of experiences. It's like foie gras. It gets too rich. It's not helpful. I love to see kids working. To take care of someone else's child and earn money and have the responsibility of human life? It's fantastic!

WJD: In some of your articles, you talk about this concept of 'teacups' and 'crispies.' Does camp prevent both the teacup and the crispie?



WM: Yes. That's a really good point. The 'teacups' are the kids who've been over-protected by their handlers. They feel very fragile. And when you see that you can swim across a really cold lake or you can find ways to manage a very obnoxious bunkmate or you can build a campfire? These are just wonderful for the 'teacup' kids. It's sort of like the best aspects of army basic training. And the 'crispies' are all burned out from their schedule—all that homework in 5th and 6th grade, their very, very scheduled days. One of the things I remember loving so much at camp was just sitting by the pond catching tree frogs. And lying outside at night and looking at the stars. That's what the 'crispies' need. Downtime.

WJD: How do you combat separation anxiety? Homesickness?

WM: Don't panic. Don't take it at face value. Take your lead from the professions. They've dealt with hundreds of cases. Sometimes the parents are more nervous than the kids, and they cue the kids. We see [kids] as much more fragile than they are. **WJD**

For the complete interview with Dr. Mogel, log on www.worldjewishdigest.com.

Mindy Schiller is the assistant editor at the World Jewish Digest.

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