

Coping With Being Away From Home

A famous Sokol once said, "I went to the Slet expecting to make new friends, but I ended up with a new family".

Many of you have seen this article in the paper before. Several years ago, I wrote a similar article because I understand how difficult it can be for a child to be away from home for the first time. I can also appreciate the difficulty that the parents experience when sending their son or daughter away without them.

For some children, the Slet is more than just a competition; it is the first time that they are spending more than one night away from mom and dad. Being away from home and staying in a dorm can be a difficult for kids of all ages, but especially for our juniors. Hopefully, this experience will be a positive one that will help your child feel more comfortable when you are not with him or her. Being at the Slet without a parent offers a wonderful opportunity for both you and your children to practice "letting go" -- an experience that can contribute to the development of healthy independence. Learning to let go allows children to develop autonomy and a stronger sense of self. Here are some ways to help your child feel more secure about being away from home:

- **Listen to and talk about concerns.** As the day of departure arrives, some children understandably experience uneasiness about going off to the Slet. It is important to talk about their fears and try to put them at ease. Rather than acting on what you believe his or her feelings to be, ask good questions such as "We've been busy packing your gear. What are your thoughts about heading off to the Slet in a few days?"

- **Give him or her confidence.** Communicate your confidence in his or her ability to handle being away from home and remind him or her about "small victories," successes that he or she has experienced in other situations.
- **Let your son or daughter know that being away from home is part of growing up.** Sometimes children struggle with leaving mom and dad because they know you are struggling with letting them grow. If you are anxious about your child leaving, you will make it harder for him or her to feel comfortable.
- **Pack a special note or card.** Hide a card or small note in his or her suitcase so that when he or she arrives at the college and unpacks, there is a nice surprise waiting.
- **Make sure he or she is ready to take care of his or her own hygiene.** It is important for your son or daughter to know how to shower, brush his or her own teeth, comb his or her own hair, etc. Remind him or her that hygiene is important, especially after a long day at the track.
- **Tell your child that you are only a phone call away.** He or she can call you each night.
- **Bring a little piece of home.** Have your child choose to bring along one special thing that reminds him or her of home (a picture, teddy bear, action figure, blanket).
- **Tell your child to have FUN.** Discuss how much fun it will be to hang out on a college campus with friends. Talk about competing, sharing a room with someone else, eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner together, having late night pizza, etc.

- **Support you child.** If you are going to be at the Slet, remind him or her that you will be there at the daily events. If you will not be there, tell your son or daughter that you will be thinking about him or her.
- **Prepare your child for the possibility that he or she may not “win”.** This is probably the most difficult thing for many kids. In today’s society, many children have been taught that everyone is a winner. In sports like T-ball, every child gets a trophy at the end of the season. This sometimes leads children to believe that they will always be rewarded for a job well done. Although we would like to believe this, it is not always the case. There will be winners and losers. Not everyone will get a medal or trophy. Even though a child may do his or her very best, verbal praise from friends and coaches may be the only reward. Stress the importance of doing the best you can without expecting a trophy or medal.

As a mother, I understand wanting to keep your little ones “under your wing” forever, but this is a great opportunity for your child. He or she will gain independence, form lasting friendships, and make lifelong memories. Children feel a sense of accomplishment when they gain some independence and make their own decisions. He or she may not make the best food choices at the cafeteria, as I found out when my sons have told me they had ice cream or pop for breakfast every day, but that is all part of the experience. All that really mattered was that they enjoyed himself. They came back from the Slet raving about how much fun they had, and that they could not wait to go again.

Jacque McTaggart once said, “Your child will be better prepared to tackle the bumps on the road of life if he has been given the gift of guided independence.” So parents . . .

Relax. . . your children are in very capable hands. I am sure their independence will surprise you! I am looking forward to working with all of your children at the upcoming Slet at SUNY Brockport. Feel free to reach out to me at kathyw323@gmail.com if you have any concerns or questions

For daily updates, especially during the Slet, you can follow us on Twitter and Instagram at physicalfitnessboard, and on Facebook at Slovak Catholic Sokol. We are also hoping to live stream parts of the competition. Stay tuned for details.

Zdar Boh!

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