Parents obsess over kid pics at sleepaway camp

Picture websites such as Bunk1 thrill parents but also make them anxious.

By Lois K. Solomon, Sun Sentinel

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South Florida's helicopter parents, who hover over their children's every move while they are home, can now do almost the same thing when they are at sleepaway camp.

Camps are posting daily photo updates of campers as they swim, eat lunch, play softball and tie-dye their T-shirts near the lakes of Maine, the hills of Pennsylvania or the mountains of North Carolina.

When the parents went to sleepaway camp, they had no contact with their own mothers and fathers, except for letters and on visiting day. But now, parents can email, send care packages and scan daily photos through websites such as Bunk1.com, on which more than 1,000 camps post pictures.

South Florida parents admit to scouring the sites for pics of their kids every day, even hourly, to make sure they are having a good time. At work, at the gym or at home, they click the "Refresh" button, hoping for a new shot of their child laughing in the pool.

"I check like a maniac," said Lisa Cohen, of Boca Raton, whose two children attend Camp Pinewood in North Carolina. She emails them through Bunk1 daily, as does her husband, Jeff. "Wherever I am, I check on my iPhone. If I am out to dinner, I try to be polite, but I have to check."

Cohen said she hits "refresh" almost every half-hour from 7 to 11 p.m., when the camp uploads new photos from that day.

Although kids are required to give up their electronic toys when they get to camp, there is no one to make the same summer demand of parents, which forces some to wonder: Does the constant monitoring make adults feel better, or worse?

Some parents, anxious because their kids have not appeared in a photo that day, call the camps to make sure they are all right, creating new headaches for camp directors. Cohen said she has never called, but said she panicked when her daughter looked sick and exhausted shortly after she arrived. She felt better when Taylor's appearance had improved by the next download.

Parent Adam Kraemer, of Parkland, whose son goes to Camp Echo in New York, said he looks for photos of Dylan, 11, every few hours.
"It's good that you can monitor them in a way that doesn't impede their space," Kraemer said. "I always thought I wanted my kids to go to sleepaway camp, but then as they got older, I realized how much I would miss them. When I see him smiling, it makes me feel better."

Technology is still severely limited for the kids. Almost every camp requires them to give up their cellphones on arrival. Phone calls are usually limited to emergencies. Although most camps now allow kids to receive emails from their parents, most require them to write back the old-fashioned way, through snail mail.

Lisa Borg, a consultant with The Camp Experts in Boca Raton, said parents need to trust the decision they made to send their kids away. She said some camps post 500 pictures a day, while others post only 200 the whole summer.

She said she hasn't seen pictures of her own daughter for two days, and that's OK.

"You have a break from your kids," Borg said. "Enjoy the time."

Still, some parents cannot let go. Scott Brockman, director of Florida Atlantic University's Hillel, whose son, Noah, 12, attends Eisner Camp in Massachusetts, said he searches for pictures before he gets out of bed in the morning.

"The world could be exploding around me, but it's the first thing I do when I get up," Brockman said. "It would be just as nice to see pictures of him at the end of the summer, but if it's there for me every day, I want it."