

Tips for Selecting a Summer Camp Program

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If you are planning to enroll your child in a camp there are several things you should consider when choosing a camp program:

Day or Residential?

Summer camps come in a variety of lengths. Day camps are great for a child's first camp experience and work well for children who don't like to be away from home.

Residential camps, on the other hand, can last anywhere from one week to the entire summer, depending upon the type of program chosen. They offer the opportunity for children to gain independence away-from-home, explore new activities, and create friendships!

Type of Camp?

To help make camp a fun and memorable experience for your child, you need to find a program that fits your child's age and interests. If your child loves sports or arts or activities in nature, try to find a program which offers these activities. Don't make the mistake of assuming that a camp which emphasizes sports will motivate a child who hasn't shown much interest in sports.

Traditional camps offer a variety of activities that include recreation, arts and crafts, individual and team activities, games etc... Campers are usually able to select their favorites from a long list of activities or can choose to try something new each day.

Specialized or theme camps offer activities and instruction in one or two very focused skills such as the performing arts (dance, theater...), a particular sport (horseback riding, scuba diving...). This type of camp is geared toward improving skills in the specialized activity, while still allowing some free time for other camp pursuits such as swimming, hiking, arts and crafts, discovering a region (field trips). These programs are best for children who enjoy specific activities and who have the ability to concentrate on something for longer periods.

Location of Camp?

If this is the first summer camp experience for your child, then a day-camp that is relatively close to your home might provide some reassurance. Now, if the perfect camp for your child is located further away or even abroad, don't let that stop you! Once your child gets to camp and gets involved, the distance really won't matter so much, what matters is that you work with an organization that you trust who will provide you with great service and help you feel close to your child even from far away.

Cost of Camp?

While researching the cost of the camp program, make sure to know about the total cost. Are there additional charges for some of the activities? Are you expected to provide transportation, meals or equipment? What is the refund policy if your child gets sick or something unexpected comes up at the last minute?

Duration of Camp?

How long does your child want to spend at a camp? In day camps campers attend only during the day for as many weeks as they like. Overnight camps however, last anywhere from one week to the entire summer.

Even if you plan for your child to spend a large part of the summer in camp, be sure to leave a few weeks free for them to just chill. After going non-stop for the entire school year, children really need at least a week or two with no planned activities so that they can unwind. Otherwise please keep in mind that even the most entertaining camp could turn into a stressful experience.

Referrals?

Ask teachers, parents and even other kids for their summer camp suggestions. Good referrals can go a long way to helping you feel comfortable with your camp selection. If you have concerns, then consider visiting the camp in person and talking directly to the staff members.

More questions to ask directors of prospective camp programs:

- What is the camper return rate? - returning campers mean happy campers
- How old and/or experienced are the counselors? What is the counselor-to-camper ratio?
- What kind of training or education is required of the staff? Are staff members required to be certified in CPR and first aid?
- What are the camp rules and regulations, what is the phone call policy of the camp? Is it something that you and your child are comfortable with?
- Can you supply references, especially the names of other parents whose children have attended the program?
- Can the camp accommodate health concerns and other special needs such as allergies, asthma, dispensing medication, diabetes, etc.?

Now that you have chosen the best summer camp for your child, it is time to prepare for a wonderful summer full of fun, new friends and exciting experiences!

To help your child have a successful time at camp

Whether this is your child's first time attending a summer camp or not, preparation is important for a positive camp experience. Here are some recommendations:

1. If possible, make plans for a visit to the camp with your child, especially if she/he's anxious about going to camp. If visiting isn't an option, then spend time browsing through the brochures and/or visit the camp's Web site to get a feeling for the camp facilities.
2. Consider arranging for a first-time camper to attend with a close friend or relative. For overnight camps it is best if the buddy is close in age, so they can room together in the same room.
3. Begin packing several weeks in advance to avoid last minute shopping trips or scrambles to find that 'must-have' favorite shirt. Most sleep-away camps will send a packing checklist to get you started. When packing for summer camp, be sure to:
 - Familiarize yourself with any camp regulations regarding food and money
 - Put your child's name or initials in all clothing (at least important items) with a laundry marker and make sure she helps you pack, so she knows what she's bringing
 - Encourage your child to pack a favorite picture or stuffed animal as a reminder of home
 - Tuck in some stamped envelopes or pre-addressed postcards
4. Don't buy a brand-new wardrobe. While one or two new items are fine, camp life can be a bit rough on clothing. Children, especially first-timers, will also find "old favorites" reassuring when away from home.
5. Spend time talking to your child about what camp will be like and listen to any fears and concerns. Remind your child that apprehension and homesickness are perfectly normal feelings.
6. Fear of the unknown is usually the biggest worry for children attending camp, so time spent at home "practicing" a typical day at camp may provide some reassurance and self-confidence. Be sure to practice anything which your child may need to know but not be used to, from doing laundry to walking after dark with a flashlight.
7. Send a letter to your child at camp before camp begins to that she will have a letter waiting for her on that first, very important day.
8. Look into your camp's phone call regulations and discuss them with your child. If the camp has a no phone calls policy, then honor it and make sure your child also understands this policy. If you do plan to make calls, then reach an agreement ahead of time with your child on when and how often.

9. Care packages can be the highlight of your child's day when at camp, but think smart when putting one together. Check with the camp regarding guidelines on food as many do not allow it. If you do send food, be sure to include enough for everyone in the group! Other items which are easily shared with roommates include games, cards, Mad-Lib books, etc. Other good care package goodies include a disposable camera, journal, address book, water bottle, or a t-shirt or pillowcase for autographs.
10. Be realistic. Like the rest of life, camp will probably have its high and low points. Make sure your child does not feel pressured to succeed at camp, and remind her that the main purpose of camp is to RELAX AND HAVE FUN !