



Summer Camps

Going to camp, especially sleep-away camp, is almost a rite of passage for America's youth and it remains a popular summer care option today. Camp can help your child:

- Learn or enhance a sport, hobby or skill
- Discover the meaning of caring for him or herself, others and the environment
- Boost self-esteem and gain confidence
- Survive without television, cellphones, computers, and other electronic devices.
- Learn to make choices and accept responsibility
- Gain independence

And, best of all, your child will probably come home with great memories. This guide provides valuable information on how to choose a camp that meets your child's unique interests and needs.

Types of Summer Camps

There are thousands of camps across the country, and the choices can seem limitless. To narrow your search, first determine whether you want your child to attend a general camp that places equal attention on a variety of activities, or a specialty camp that focuses on one particular skill, interest or theme. The most popular activities offered at general camps include sports, arts and crafts, swimming, canoeing, hiking, nature study and archery. Specialty camps may focus on any one of those activities—or an even more specific area such as aviation, computers, cheerleading, travel and adventure, weight loss, drama or any sport you can possibly think of. There are also camps for children with special needs—and for gifted and talented children.

Once you've determined what type of camp is best for your child, you must also determine whether you want your child to attend a day camp (which does not provide overnight accommodations) or a residential camp (which provides room and board)—or a combination of the two.

Don't wait until school is out to start exploring summer care options. Your best bet is to start your search the summer before you need care or January or February of the same year. Most camps begin enrollment in the early spring and are often filled within a couple of months. Plus, some summer camps offer early enrollment discounts, which can save you money while ensuring that your child gets enrolled in the camp of your choice.

Summer Day Camps

Day camps provide daily summer care and supervision for children—typically between ages four to 17—as well as a variety of educational and recreational activities. Most day camps operate Monday through Friday and offer part- or full-day options. Many also offer transportation, flexible scheduling and other options that make them more convenient for working parents. Day camps typically offer a general program and the majority are coed (although single-sex specialty day camps can be found). Children are generally placed in groups according to their age and/or sex, and are supervised and cared for by one or more counselors. (Children who are grouped according to gender generally are cared for by counselors of the same sex.) Many day camps also offer counselor-in-training programs or counselor jobs for teenagers. (For more information, please refer to the guide *Summer Options for Teens*.)

Some day camps are organized through local nonprofit agencies, churches or other community organizations; others are privately owned. Costs of camps vary greatly, and some may charge additional fees for special programs or activities, such as a field trip or transportation services.



Universal licensing is not required for day camps, and rules and requirements for camps vary from state to state, so check with the town's health department to inquire about camp safety standards and regulations.

Residential Summer Camps

Better known as “sleep-away camps,” residential camps provide room, board, supervision and a variety of activities for children from about the age of four through the teenage years. There are thousands of camps in various parts of this country and overseas; some are privately owned, others are operated by community agencies, nonprofit organizations or youth groups. Residential camps may be general or specialty, coed or single sex, but the common denominator is that campers sleep at the camp. Overnight accommodations typically consist of cabins, tents or teepees, and dormitories that house a certain number of campers and at least one counselor. Camp size may vary from under 100 campers to over 400. Cost varies considerably by location, type and length of program and other factors. Camps with specialty programs may be more expensive than those with general programs. Take time to consider the cost of each camp and what your family can reasonably afford.

Residential camps are required by law to be licensed by the state in which they are operating. Although licensing requirements and regulatory codes vary from state to state, residential camps typically are required to pass safety, supervision and sanitation inspections to ensure that the camp is clean, well-equipped and, above all, safe. Additional certification requirements may be required for staff members, depending on the camp. The director of a waterfront camp, for example, must be certified in water safety, and specialty camps typically require directors, counselors or instructors to be certified in a particular sport or area of expertise. Once a camp is licensed, it will be periodically regulated by the state to ensure that the camp continues to run in compliance with state health and safety standards. In addition to checking a camp's compliance with state laws, parents should thoroughly evaluate the credentials, policies and procedures of all residential camps they are considering.

Summer Camps for Children with Special Needs

Many day and residential camps also offer programs for children who are cognitively, emotionally, and/or physically challenged, or who have health impairments. Some camps mainstream campers with special needs into the general population while making sure that they also get the special care they need. Other camps cater solely to children with special needs and typically have a highly trained staff that may consist of counselors, social workers, health care aides or therapists who have experience working with challenged children. Special needs camps also have a lower counselor to camper ratio to provide more individualized care and attention to campers. They may even structure activities around your child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). A medical facility equipped to meet the special needs of your child should be on the premises or nearby. As with all camps, parents should thoroughly evaluate the camp's credentials, policies and procedures to determine appropriateness.

Summer Camps for Gifted and Talented Children

There are numerous day and residential summer camps designed exclusively for academically and/or artistically gifted and talented children. Typically, these camps focus either on academics and/or fine arts and offer structured, challenging programs that do not include recreational activities. Some camps, however, combine traditional summer camp activities with the academic/artistic program. Other camps, known as adventure camps, offer challenging and exciting programs for those children who crave challenge but prefer not to be in a classroom or academic environment during the summer.

Camps for the gifted and talented may be run by universities and public or parochial schools; others are privately owned or operated by nonprofit organizations. The cost will vary depending on the program. Scholarships and other funding alternatives may be available based on talent and/or need. Unlike most summer camps, almost all camps for the gifted and talented require children to pass an entrance exam or meet certain criteria before they are accepted into a program. For more information, please refer to the guide *Finding Summer Programs for Gifted and Talented Children*.

Since these camps can be intense, make sure this is a summer option that appeals to both you and your child. Some children need a break from academics for the summer; others will get bored without the

stimulation. Still others will benefit by attending a gifted and talented camp for part of the summer, and another type of camp or summer program for the rest of the summer. Before you make a final decision, keep in mind that some children may get bored or have difficulty socializing with campers at a regular day or residential camp if they are far more advanced than their peers. As with all camps, parents should thoroughly evaluate the camp's credentials, policies and procedures to determine appropriateness.

Choosing a Summer Camp

How do you know which camp is best for your child? That depends on many different factors including the age of your child, how easily he or she handles separation from the family, your child's interests and unique needs—and your own preferences, budget and needs. To help you and your child determine together what camp best suits his or her needs, we've created a "Summer Camp Preferences Worksheet" located at the end of this guide.

Day camp is typically the best choice for younger children because they can spend the day with other children their age and return to their own home and family at night. While residential camps may allow children as young as four to enroll, the American Camp Association suggests that children under age seven may not adjust easily to being away from home and parents may wish to consider the day camp experience to prepare them for future overnight camp. However, age is not the definitive measure. Proven social and emotional abilities, a sense of independence, and the ability to adapt to nights away from home are positive indicators that your child may be ready for sleep-away camp. Another strong indicator of readiness is if your child expresses an interest in going away to camp.

If your child is ready for residential camp, you must also decide how long he or she should attend. This too will depend largely on your child, and how well he or she adapts to being away from home. Ask the camp director what length of stay he or she recommends, and determine what length of stay you and your child will be most comfortable with. To help prevent homesickness, select a camp that is close to your home for your child's first residential camp experience, or consider having your child attend with a friend or relative. Some camps may provide you with a list of names of campers in the same cabin; if so, you may suggest your child contact another camper prior to camp so

your child will know at least one other child when he or she arrives. Keep in mind, most children need a few days to adjust to being away from home, so don't panic if your child expresses homesickness the first few days of camp. Oftentimes homesickness dissipates with time as a child makes friends and becomes comfortable in the camp's surroundings.

Evaluating Summer Camps

No matter what type of camp you choose, there are three basic qualities to look for:

- A safe, protective environment
- An opportunity for your child to form relationships with other children and adults
- A variety of interesting and stimulating activities appropriate to your child and his or her interests

While you will need to conduct your own thorough evaluation of each camp you are considering, you may also wish to find out whether the camp is accredited by the American Camp Association, Inc. (ACA). The ACA is a community of camp professionals dedicated to enriching the lives of children and adults through the camp experience. Camp owners/ operators voluntarily agree to uphold a stringent code of camp and management practices recognized among professionals as basic to camp operations. Although many state and federal laws and regulations address basic sanitation and food services, ACA's standards go a step beyond and address programming, personnel and management practices that relate specifically to summer camp. ACA accreditation verifies a camp's compliance with up to 300 individual health, safety and program quality standards. These standards establish criteria for living areas, food service, emergency preparedness, program practices, health care, personnel, transportation and administrative procedures. Accreditation assures parents that practices of a camp have been measured against national standards. While accreditation by the ACA is a good

The best time to visit a camp is when it is in session so you can get a true feel for the campers, counselors, activities and organization of the camp. Visiting a camp in the winter, when camp is out of session, is not as effective.

indicator of quality, be sure to ask questions and assess each camp as you would any other since accreditation does not mean that a camp is appropriate for your child. It is also important to note that lack of accreditation does not necessarily mean that a camp is substandard.

Once you have narrowed your search, carefully evaluate each camp you are considering. Contact and/or meet the camp director of each camp you are interested in. (*Note*—The ACA recommends that camp directors possess a bachelor’s degree, have completed training within the past three years, and have at least 16 weeks of camp administrative experience before assuming role of director.) Ask each director for a description of the camp’s philosophy and have them explain how it is carried out by staff members. If you are satisfied with the answer, set up an appointment to visit the camp with your child, preferably before you enroll. Use the “Camp Evaluation Checklist” at the end of this guide to help you ask questions about each camp. Make several copies and complete one for each camp you visit. You may also want to bring your “Summer Camp Preferences Worksheet” to make side-by-side comparisons of each camp. If you are unable to visit a camp, review the “Camp Evaluation Checklist” with the camp director over the telephone and ask for any brochures, photographs and/or virtual tours of the camp. In addition, it is common for camps to provide a list of references of parents whose children have attended the camp. If you are not given one, ask for references and call at least three.

Ask directors at every camp you are considering whether the camp has met state licensing requirements (if applicable.) If you have any questions or reservations, contact the state health department, the state and local licensing agency or department of social services. They can tell you if a camp is licensed and provide information about its history. In addition, contact the Better Business Bureau to find out if complaints have been registered against a camp. If a camp is supposed to be licensed, and is not, do not send your child there. If a camp has met licensing requirements, it is a positive sign that its facilities were in satisfactory working condition upon evaluation. Meeting these requirements, however, is not an endorsement or guarantee of the quality of the camp’s programs or curriculum. Only you, as a parent, can determine whether a camp is appropriate for your child.

The ACA recommends the following ratio of counselors to campers:

Residential Camp

Ages	Counselor/Camper Ratios
4-5	1:5
6-8	1:6
9-14	1:8
15-17	1:10

Day Camps

Ages	Counselor/Camper Ratios
4-5	1:6
6-8	1:8
9-14	1:10
15-17	1:12

Note—These ratios are recommended, not required, and should serve as a general guide only.

Helpful Resources

American Camp Association, Inc. (ACA)

5000 State Road 67 N.

Martinsville, IN 46151

765-342-8456

www.acacamps.org

This community of camp professionals accredits and supports day and residential camp programs throughout the United States. Camp owners/operators voluntarily agree to uphold a stringent code of camp and management practices. ACA-accreditation verifies a camp’s compliance with up to 300 individual health, safety and program quality standards. Call ACA directly or visit the web site for information about ACA-accredited camps.

Summer Camp Preferences Worksheet

To help determine what camp best suits the needs of your child, fill in the “Camp Preferences” worksheet below. If possible, complete this with your child and use it as a reference each time you evaluate and/or visit a camp.

1. Camp Program: What type of camp do you prefer?

- Day Residential A combination of day camp and residential camp

2. Camp Location: How far away should the camp be from your home?

- In the same city In the same state In the same country
 Location is not the most important factor

3. Camp Setting: What kind of setting does your child prefer?

- Country Suburb City Ocean Mountains Lakeside
 Any setting is fine

4. Camp Size: What size camp would you and your child be most comfortable with?

- Small Average Large Any size

5. Gender of Campers: Would your child be more comfortable at a coed or single-sex camp?

- All boys All girls Coed

6. Ages of Campers: What age range would work best for your child?

- Same age Two-year spread
 Three-year spread Five-year spread Any age range is fine

7. Duration of Camp Sessions: How long would you like your child to attend day camp or residential camp?

- One week or less Two weeks or less Three weeks or less
 One month or less One month or more The entire summer

8. Cost:

How much can you afford to spend on camp? _____

Have you budgeted for additional costs including:

- Transportation? Special services? Other summer child care arrangements?

9. Camp Focus: What type of camp do you think would be best for your child?

- General camp
 Specialty camp—what type?
 Gifted and talented camp—what type?
 Special needs camp—to meet what needs? (See additional questions the follow.)

List the activities you want your child to pursue/participate in at camp:_____

List any other important features that you are looking for in a camp:_____

10. Additional Questions for Campers with Special Needs: Are you looking for a special needs program that:

- Is adaptable and accessible to the special needs of your child?
- Has specially trained counselors to meet the special needs of your child?
- Includes your child in activities with other campers who do not have special needs?
- Has a medical facility equipped to handle the needs of your child?
- Is willing to work with your child's current Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

Summer Camp Evaluation Checklist

This checklist will help you assess camps you are considering. Make copies and use one for each camp you evaluate.

Camp Name: _____

Camp Director's Name: _____

Contact Information (website url, e-mail, phone): _____

Items to Obtain from Camp

1. **Brochure**
2. **Policies/Procedures Manual** (if available)
3. **Financial Information/Policies** (e.g., fees, discounts/scholarships/financial aid, payment schedule, cancelation policy, refunds, etc.)
4. **Licensing Confirmation/Information**

Note—All residential camps must be licensed by the state in which they are operating. Day camps are not all required to be licensed.

Is the camp fully licensed by the state where applicable? No Yes

Note—If the camp has not met licensing requirements, do not consider that camp.

Is the camp ACA-accredited? No Yes

Note—Remember, lack of accreditation does not necessarily mean lack of quality.

Questions to Ask

Camp Director

Note—The ACA recommends that camp directors possess a bachelor's degree, have completed training within the past three years, and have at least 16 weeks of camp administrative experience before assuming role of director.

5. **Does the camp director have a bachelor's degree?** No Yes
6. **What is the camp director's relevant training and camp background?** _____

Camp Staff

7. **What percentage of the camp counselors are over the age of 18?** _____

Note—ACA standards recommend that 80 percent or more of the staff be over age 18.

8. **What experience, certifications and training do the camp staff members have?** _____

9. **Do the camp staff members have first-aid, CPR/AED and lifeguard training?** No Yes

10. **Are the camp staff members trained in outdoor safety issues (e.g., Lyme disease, bee stings, water safety, etc.)?** No Yes

Camp Program

11. What is the camper/counselor ratio? _____

12. What is the camp philosophy? _____

13. Do you offer programs related to specific camper interests? No Yes

14. Do you offer programs at varying levels of skill/talent? No Yes

15. How does the camp measure success in meeting its program goals and how successful has it been in meeting those goals?

Camp Facilities and Services

16. What medical resources are available? Are there medical facilities and staff with medical training on-site? Are stocked first-aid kits in all camp buildings and activity areas? No Yes

17. What are the policies and procedures for illness, injury and other medical needs?

18. What policies and procedures are in place to ensure facilities—in particular eating and sleeping areas—are clean and safe?

19. What policies and procedures are in place to ensure campers' security (e.g., prevent entrance by strangers, etc.)?

20. What policies and procedures are in place to ensure camper safety at water sites?

21. Are water sites supervised by a trained lifeguard? Is lifesaving equipment provided at all water sites? No Yes

22. What policies, procedures and protective gear are in place to ensure camper safety for other activities (e.g., bicycling, horseback riding, hiking, rock climbing, ropes courses, etc.)?

23. What are the nutrition policies of the camp? Please describe typical meals and snacks that are provided to campers.

24. *Additional question if your child has special dietary needs (e.g., food allergies, vegan, vegetarian, kosher, etc.):* What options are available to address my child's special dietary needs?

25. Are transportation options available What options are provided? (if needed)

No Yes

Other

26. What are the camp's policies and procedures regarding discipline, Internet access, e-mail, telephone calls, electronic devices and visits?

27. Will you provide me with at least three parent references? No Yes

Note—Be sure to call all three.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Additional Questions for Special Needs Camps

28. How is your program designed to meet and address my child's special needs?

29. What training does your staff have in working with children with special needs?

30. What is the counselor to camper ratio for campers with special needs? _____

31. Are the facilities equipped to handle my child's special needs (i.e., camp is wheelchair accessible, transportation is accessible, etc.)? No Yes

32. Do other campers have needs similar to my child's? No Yes

33. Is the camp willing to work with my child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

No Yes

34. Is the camp capable of working with any special equipment my child requires? No Yes

Observations to Ask Yourself

35. Does the camp's program philosophy agree with your own? No Yes

36. Does the camp have a clear aim for what it wants to accomplish for campers? No Yes

37. Will your child's interests, talents and/or special needs be met and nurtured at the camp?

No Yes

38. Are you comfortable with camp security? No Yes

39. Are you comfortable with the camp's policies regarding discipline, internet access, e-mail, telephone calls, electronic devices and visits? No Yes

40. Is the camp clean, adequately staffed and well-run? No Yes

41. Is the camp staff friendly and professional? No Yes

42. Does staff interact well with children? No Yes

43. Is the camp director and/or other leadership readily accessible and responsive to you?

No Yes

For Specialty Camps

44. Does the program match your child's interests? No Yes

45. Is the program appropriate for your child's level of skill/talent? No Yes

46. Will the program expand or help further develop your child's skills/talents?

No Yes

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