

Guidelines for Summer Care for Your Child

When the wind is blowing and the snow is still on the ground, it is hard to believe that it's time to consider summer care or camp activities. Children anticipate the fun and freedom that summer holidays give them. For working parents, however, the thought of summer care can cause a great deal of anxiety. If you prepare for summer early enough, you can make the experience successful for your child. For many children, summer programs, like a camp, can provide an enriched environment, a time to develop new interests, and opportunities to make new friends.

The quality of care offered for school-age children in the summer varies. When you consider a particular summer camp, apply many of the same standards that you would use to choose a childcare center or a family home provider.

The characteristics of quality programs

- Experienced staff
- Low staff to child ratio
- A balance of independent, small and large group activities
- Scheduled quiet or rest time
- Field trips
- Staff training (water safety and first aid or CPR credentials)
- Well established health and safety procedures

You should begin contacting resident camps in January and day camps in March or April. These programs fill very quickly. As you begin your search for care, consider these questions:

- When is my child's school out for the summer? When does it begin again in the fall?
- When do I have vacation time?

Ask for brochures or other materials that might include information about:

- Fees, sessions, and operating hours
- Ages of children and how they are grouped
- Qualifications and number of staff
- Enrollment requirements
- Transportation to and from camp
- Meals, snacks, and beverages
- Types of activities

Once you've read through the materials, call the camps to ask for three references, preferably from parents whose children have attended the camp program.

Making the Decision

The key here is to communicate! Before you choose a camp, discuss options for summertime activities with your child. You may want to suggest several viable choices and give your child a part in the final decision.

Younger children may not want to spend their entire summer at a childcare center. In that case, you could consider an arrangement that would divide the time between a camp and in-home care. Many responsible teenagers are available who would enjoy taking care of children over the summer, thus giving your child a change from the childcare center routine.

Older children may want to stay home by themselves. Knowing your child's strengths and needs is very important. Is your child mature and trustworthy enough to be at home without adult supervision? Is your neighborhood safe?

Remember, many possibilities and combinations of activities exist that will keep everyone happy, safe, occupied, and interested during the summer. The key is to *start early* and investigate all possibilities.

Day Camps

Day camps give school-age children a wide range of opportunities and experiences. Depending on the needs and interests of your child and on your family's schedule and plans, you may want to consider the day camp option for your child's care or educational growth.

Many day camps schedule open houses in the late winter or early spring and encourage both parents and children to visit. Day camps are suitable for preschoolers to young teens.

Many camp programs may be near your home or work area. Some are available through childcare centers, agency camps, parks and recreation departments, church and private school camps, and specialty camps. They frequently offer half-day or full-day sessions and provide a variety of activities such as swimming, sports, arts and crafts, nature study, and field trips.

Childcare Centers

Many childcare centers offer exciting summer experiences for school-age children. Centers interested in meeting the needs of parents in their community provide summer school-age care that closely matches their parents' work schedules, unlike the regular day camp hours of 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM.

Most childcare centers welcome younger children. When considering this option, review the program routine to ensure that children have activities that match their ages, abilities, and interests. Many programs divide the children into *junior* and *senior* campers. Senior campers may take the role of counselor in training, helping staff with younger children. Quality programs also provide training and allow staff time for planning daily experiences. You may also want to ask for a calendar of events, a list of field trips, and any special themes that the program may include.

Agency Camps

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy and Girl Scouts, and community centers often have summer camps. They may offer programs at a main facility or satellite branch and are usually available for children from 5 years old to 15.

Fees vary depending on location and offerings. Many families may be eligible for scholarships to pay for some or all of tuition. The United Way funds some programs and they may offer sliding fee scales. Agency camps may give older teens an opportunity to participate in a Counselor in Training (CIT) program, designed to develop leadership skills, responsibility, and creativity.

Parks and Recreation Programs

Some county and city parks and recreation departments offer both extended day and half-day summer camp programs. These programs are reasonably priced and usually operate on weekly schedules. When looking about these programs, be sure to ask about the ages and training of staff members and the size of the groups they will be supervising. Also ask about back-up or "rainy day" plans and whether indoor facilities are available.

Church and Private School Camps

Area churches may have summer camp and Bible school programs. Investigate this option early because these programs are usually small and fill up quickly. Private school camps offer a variety of activities, but they can be more expensive than community or agency programs and they may not operate throughout the summer.

Specialty Camps

Specialty camps offer intensive programs in one area of interest and usually run for a short time, typically one week.

Residential Camps

Residential camps offer many of the same athletic and creative arts classes as day camps. One difference is the intensity of the activity and the child's commitment to participate and learn or improve skills.

Activities such as sailing, boating, tennis, swimming, gymnastics, and horseback riding make excellent programs at residential camps. Children who choose resident camps for summer also benefit in other ways. They have opportunities to be introduced to new interests and to enhance their self-confidence, self-concept, independence, responsibility, social skills, and self-discipline.

Many children are not ready for the "away from home" experience. Before you consider this type of camp, make sure your child is ready to be away from you and that the camp can meet his individual needs. Part of being away from home overnight is going through a growth and development process. To help determine if residential camp will be a successful experience for your child, consider the following questions:

■ **Does my child really want to go?**

Involve your child in the selection process from the very beginning. Explore any reluctance your child may have. Validate his feelings while explaining the many exciting benefits of camp life. Talk about how you will communicate with him while he is gone. If

the child is fearful and upset at the idea of going to a resident camp, consider other options for the summer. Allow time for growth and maturity.

■ **What will camp be like?**

Collect camp brochures or videos. Most resident camps schedule an open house for families to visit and see what it will be like. Ask for references. Talk to parents and children who have attended the camp and ask them to share stories with you and your child.

■ **Is my child mature enough for an overnight camp?**

Has your child been away from home before and how did he handle each situation? Has your child experienced day camps, scouts, or other overnight camping trips? Does he enjoy spending the night with friends or relatives? Does your child have any fears or needs that might make adjustments to camp difficult (such as bed-wetting or fear of the dark)?

■ **Are we making the right choice?**

Camp facilities, activities, and philosophies differ. Ask questions. Share any concerns about your child's attendance with camp staff. Make the camp fit the child, not the other way around. Preparing properly for this experience can make resident camp a positive summertime adventure for your child.

Summer Camp Checklist

Here are some questions to ask when you are considering a summer program. Remember, the more questions you ask, the more information you will have on which to base your decision.

Is the camp licensed by your state?

- Yes
- No

Is the site safe and well maintained?

- Yes
- No

Is the resident camp accredited by the American Camping Association?

- Yes
- No

Is there a small group size and good ratio of adults to children?

1:6 for 6 years old and younger

1:7 for 7 and 8 year olds

1:8 for 9 through 14 year olds

1:10 for 13 and older

- Yes
- No

Is a responsible adult always in charge?

- Yes
- No

Has the director had experience in running camp programs and working with school-age children?

- Yes
- No

What are the camp's written policies and procedures?

Does the camp have an onsite person trained in first aide and CPR?

- Yes
- No

What are the camp's emergency procedures?

Are drinking water and toilets always available during outdoor activities?

- Yes
- No

Do the children and staff have access to an indoor, air-conditioned place to avoid heat or rain?

- Yes
- No

Does the program offer a variety of activities and can a child choose the activities?

- Yes
- No

Is there a time for a rest or quiet period?

- Yes
- No

If the children are transported on field trips, who drives the van? How many adults are on each trip?

Is the van well maintained? Does it have seat belts for everyone?

- Yes
- No

During waterfront or swimming activities, is an appropriate number of staff with water safety credentials present?

- Yes
- No

Are there additional fees?

- Yes
- No