

**RESOURCES  
ON CALL**



The  
After-school/  
Summer  
Camp Kit

*A comprehensive*

*guide to finding,*

*evaluating,*

*and choosing*

*programs for*

*school-age*

*children*

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## **EXPLORING AN AFTER-SCHOOL CARE PROGRAM**

Working parents with school-age children require safe, well-supervised care for their kids during the hours between school dismissal and mom or dad's return home. Some families also need before-school programs. No matter what type of after-school care you consider, look for these three basic ingredients of quality: a safe, protective environment; the opportunity for your child to form stable relationships with caring adults and other children; and adequate stimulation that is appropriate to your child's age.

### **WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR?**

While every program is different, make sure to look for:

- A caring staff that really likes children.
- Interesting and challenging activities.
- Surroundings that are healthy and safe.
- Beyond these, finding the best care is a matter of determining what's important to you and your children, and finding the best match.

### **First, Consider Your Children**

- What kind of activities do your children enjoy most? Active, outside play? Reading? Arts and crafts? Computer games? Sports? Drama? The best programs have enough variety to accommodate children with different interests

### **What Are the Hours, Logistics, and Costs?**

- How early can you drop your children off in the morning? How late is the center open in the evening?
- Is care available when school is closed for parent conferences, vacations, holidays, and bad-weather days? Does it cost extra?
- Can your children attend during the summer months? Is the center closed certain weeks for staff training or vacations? If so, ask the director to recommend alternatives.
- Is the tuition affordable? Are scholarships or sliding fees available?
- What extra fees are there? What is the late fee? Are you expected to pay extra for field trips, tutoring, music or sports lessons, or equipment?

### **WHAT DOES A GOOD SCHOOL-AGE PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?**

**Indoors:** Some settings just "feel" right. The best settings offer:

- Enough room so children can move from one area to another without disturbing other children's activities or projects.
- Quiet areas for conversation, puzzles, reading or homework; small group areas for games, art, science projects, or dramatic play; and open areas for noisy and active indoor play.
- A cozy, "home away from home" feeling with carpets, couches, pillows, plants, and comfortable chairs.
- Safe, comfortable surroundings kept warm enough in the winter and cool enough in the summer-and bathrooms that are clean and convenient.
- Opportunities for privacy, for children to play independently without constant direct supervision.

**Outdoors:** Programs should make plenty of time for outdoor play, and offer:

- A clean, safe outdoor play area protected from traffic and unwanted visitors.
- Lots of room for children to be able to run around, and separate areas for active games, sports, climbing, and quiet play.
- Well-kept outdoor play equipment--enough so no one has to wait too long for a turn.
- If there's not an outdoor play area on-site, find out where children go for outside activities, how often they go, and how they get there.

### **WHAT'S ON THE SCHEDULE?**

The hours before and after school should not feel structured, like "school." Instead, the mood should be relaxed, free-flowing, and full of interesting things to choose from. Look for a place that offers children their choice of activities, plenty of time to play, run around, laugh out loud.

**Physical Activity.** Indoor and outdoor sports and games help kids unleash all the energy they've stored inside them all day. Before-school warm-ups helps get ready for the day.

**Mental Activity.** Challenging games and projects give children the opportunity to learn new things without feeling like they're still in class.

**Individual Activity.** It's important for children to have quiet time to sit and think, do homework, read, sketch, or just daydream.

**Social Activity.** Children need time to play with old friends and make new ones, time to learn social skills, and to find out about being a leader - and a follower.

### **Is the Schedule Flexible?**

- Is the daily schedule rigid with start and stop times for everything, or can children spend extra time on projects they're interested in, and move on to something else if they're bored?
- Do children work on special projects? Can they publish their own newspaper, or produce a field day, skit, or mini-Olympics
- Can children participate in outside activities, like scouting, dance lessons, or Little League? If so, is transportation available?
- Are there opportunities to create plays, pottery, or other "masterpieces" that may take days or weeks to complete?

### **DOES THE PROGRAM APPEAL TO ALL AGES?**

Kindergartners and preteens have very different interests and needs. Look for a program that:

- Offers different activities for different age groups, team sports for older children, building blocks for younger children.

- Provides a range of supplies and materials - a housekeeping corner for little ones, advanced board games and puzzles for the 12-year-olds. Make sure that any dangerous materials are kept safely out of young children's reach.
- Gives older children the feeling that they're not being closely supervised (even though they are).
- Introduces skills and ideas that are right for each age group - kickball for the 6 year olds, basketball for the 10 year olds.
- Provides space for each age group to play without interference from older or younger children, while encouraging companionship among age groups.
- If the program operates during the summer, is the schedule a continuation of the school year program, or are there new opportunities and activities?

### **IS THE PROGRAM SAFE AND HEALTHY?**

Your child's safety and health are the most important considerations in selecting a care provider. Make sure to ask these questions:

- Is there a careful check-in and checkout procedure so that children are always accounted for?
- Is there a telephone close by and available in case of emergencies?
- Are all play areas safe? Are hazardous materials kept locked away? Is the facility smoke free?
- Is there a first aid kit and a list of emergency numbers nearby? Are all children coached on what to do in a fire or other emergency?
- Is water available at all times (for drinking, cooking, cleanup, and projects)?
- Are all snacks and meals nutritious? Can children get a snack when they're hungry, or do they have to wait until a scheduled meal? Do meals and snacks include lots of fruits and vegetables?
- Is the space adaptable for children with physical limitations?

### **WHAT ABOUT THE STAFF?**

Your children deserve to be cared for by people who enjoy, respect, and understand them. But since it's unlikely that you'll be able to spend a lot of time interviewing each staff member, how can you tell?

Here are a few tips:

- Talk to parents of children who attend and ask:
  - How do their children feel about the staff? Do they enjoy them?
  - Do the children feel that the staff is patient and fair and fun?
  - How do they, as parents, feel? Does the staff make it a point to talk with the parents on a regular basis? Or do they hear from the staff only when there's a problem?
- Ask the director about the staff's background: What kinds of experience do they have?
  - Child development, social work, education, recreation, art, psychology? Have they worked with children before?
  - Does the program sponsor training for staff? If so, what subjects are included?
  - Have all current and potential staff members undergone a standard background check (criminal records)?

Is the staff sensitive to racial, ethnic, religious, and gender differences? Do staff members appreciate all cultures and abilities and welcome all children equally? Ask the director about his/her background as well. The director sets the tone for the whole program. He/she should be well-qualified, sensitive, and experienced.

### **CAN I SEE THE STAFF MEMBERS IN ACTION?**

The very best way to find out about the people who may be caring for your children is to watch them in action. Be sure to visit the program and observe the staff.

- Does the staff seem to enjoy being with the children? Are they having fun, or are they watching the clock?
- How do they handle conflicts between two or more children? Do they give the kids a chance to work out problems themselves?
- If a child needs discipline, how does the staff handle it? What if a child seems upset or angry? Are they calm and comforting?
- When a child succeeds, do they offer praise and encouragement?
- Do they encourage children to try new activities without pressuring them?
- Do the staff members seem to enjoy working with each other?
- Do you think the staff members are good examples for your children? Do you like them? Would you like your children to spend time with them and learn from them?

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## THE HEAT IS ON: PLANNING CAREFULLY FOR YOUR CHILD'S SUMMER CARE

Summers aren't always so carefree when all new child care arrangements are needed.

After nearly a decade of sitters, day care centers, and constant shuffling of their work schedules, Julie and John Larson breathed a sigh of relief. Sara was in fourth grade, Bryan in first, and a handy after-school program kept them safe and happy for an hour each day. The couple's childcare hassles had, at long last, come to an end.

And then came summer.

For working parents like the Larsons, summers aren't always so carefree when all-new childcare arrangements are needed for school-age children. But with careful planning, your child's days in the sun can be memorable for your entire family.

The Larsons, after much careful thought, settled on a patchwork approach to their day care needs. A college student will stay at home with the children during the day and shuttle them to a variety of community recreational programs and day camps. Sara and Brian also will enjoy visits to grandparents' homes, and the family will take a two-week vacation.

**Choose the best fit.** First, remember that you know your children better than anyone. Perhaps your younger child isn't ready for a full-time, structured experience, and would be happier in a home childcare setting. Like the Larsons, many families hire either a high school or college-age student to spend weekdays in their homes with their children. Others opt for a full-time nanny. Children can also spend a comfortable and productive summer in family childcare setting.

**Get with the program.** Maybe your child is better suited for a more structured summer program. Try to match your options with the child's interests. For instance, if your daughter prefers hiking to music, make sure the program you choose include the physical activities she enjoys. "It's important that a program offer choices based on your child's developmental stage and level of temperament," says Ellen Gannett, associate director of the School-Age Child Care Project at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College. "There should be an opportunity to shape his or her own day. Your child should be able to make some decisions, and be with peers of his or her own choice. You don't want your kids herded around in groups all day long."

**The wonder years.** When your kids approach the teen years, they may be too old for baby-sitters, but are they old enough to stay by themselves for a full day? Again, you, the parent, best know your child's ability to make responsible decisions. Most experts, though, recommend no child under the age of 10 be left home alone for more than a few hours. Wellesley's Gannett recommends waiting until a child is 12 or 13 before he or she stays home alone on a regular basis, especially in the summer. "Besides the safety issue, we're also dealing with boredom, loneliness, and the potential for obesity and poor physical conditioning," she explains. "Kids this age need to be active and spend time with their peers and friends."

You can help your preteens fill those hours by getting them involved in volunteer work or a particular job. Schools, churches, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, nursing

homes, libraries, museums, government agencies all offer excellent opportunities for providing community service and acquiring work experience.

Earning spending money can be another bonus. Your young teen may be interested in assisting another family as a mother's helper, or in providing services in lawn care, pet care, or errand-running. Help your child print flyers or take out a classified ad to drum up business.

If your child does stay home alone, clearly spell out your expectations. You may want to develop a handbook of potential situations and solutions, and review these together on a regular basis. Keep emergency numbers posted near the phone, and make sure you or another responsible adult are always easily accessible.



## SUMMER CAMPS

Camp is one of the surest signs of summer. **Day camps** provide opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and instruction in a variety of skills while emphasizing the out-of-doors. Day camps give both working and stay-at-home parents a break while children have fun and hone their social and recreational skills. Often, many local institutions offer their own summer day camps. Day camps for preschoolers may closely resemble the child care or nursery school programs they attend during the rest of the year, with some seasonal activities, like swimming or nature walks, added to the day's activities. Day camps for school-age children might concentrate on development of skills in specific sports, or other areas of interest. Half days and full days in weekly, monthly or full summer programs are often available.

**Resident camps** can give your child a wonderful experience that will help him or her develop self-confidence and independence, as well as learn new skills and form new friendships that can last a lifetime. Camps provide creative, recreational, and educational opportunities in group living in the outdoors, and may be found in any number of geographic settings. They may feature general programs or emphasize a particular sport or skill, like basketball, tennis, horseback riding or sailing, science and math, arts and crafts, anthropology digs or cultural enrichment.

Both day and resident camp programs are likely to end before school terms begin again in September, leaving parents with one or more weeks without child care.

Parents should be prepared to ask specific questions when considering a summer camp. As with any child care situation, the quality of the staff is of utmost importance. Sample questions include:

- What is the camp's philosophy?
- What is the camp director's background?
- What are the ages of the counselors? How many are over 18?
- What kind of skills training, prior experience, or education is required by the camp?
- Is there pre-camp training for the counselors? What is covered?
- What is the ratio of counselors to campers? What other staff is involved? Are there specialists (in music, dance, theater, etc.?)
- Is there a nurse on-site? Are counselors trained in first aid/CPR? What is the camp's doctor\hospital\emergency policy?
- Where do the children swim? How many lifeguards are on staff?
- Have the director describe a typical day at the camp, and ask about specifics mentioned in the camp's brochure. If your child is interested in a specific activity, make sure the camp offers it, and ask how often it will be available to him/her.

## **HOW TO SELECT QUALITY CHILDCARE**

No matter what type of summer childcare arrangement you consider, day camp, a local workshop, a program at the Y, look for these three basic ingredients of quality:

- a safe, protective environment
- the opportunity for your child to form stable relationships with caring adults and other children
- interesting, engaging activities appropriate to your child's age

Summer programs may be especially hard to evaluate, since many are open only during the summer and require applications and payment ahead of time. Programs run by local organizations often will have open houses well in advance of the summer, perhaps with slide shows and a number of the relevant personnel, including the director, on hand. Be sure to ask for references, so that you can talk to parents of children who have been in the programs in previous summers, and discuss their children's experiences with them.

Plan to visit several programs, since quality varies greatly. Parents may visit resident camps and other special summer programs the year before to view the facilities, talk to counselors, and get a good idea of how your child would be spending his or her time. In every case, you have to observe carefully and talk to the adults who will provide care. Do the caregivers/counselors like their work? Do they have special training that helps them understand child development? Are they friendly and involved with children? Do they tailor activities to meet the children's interests? Is this environment appropriate for your child? Adult/child interaction is an especially important aspect of any program.

### **Here are other aspects of a program to look for:**

- lots of physical activity
- avenues for creative expression
- age-appropriate toys, equipment
- positive social interaction
- an emphasis on safety
- high staff: child ratios
- trained teachers/counselors
- adequate, safe transportation
- nutritious meals/snacks
- a high level of participation in activities

**Think:** *If you were your child's age, would you want to be there?*

## 10 KEYS TO QUALITY

On the playground at Children's Living After School Program (CLASP) in Great Neck, New York, teacher Lauren Koble referees a spirited kickball game between two teams of second- and third-grade boys. When an eight-year-old in the outfield disputes a call she makes, Koble gently says, "Remember, Alex, the tie always goes to the runner."

Meanwhile, inside at CLASP, the after-school home to more than 60 kids ages five to 11, teacher Stacey Tropper watches two kindergartners put together a puzzle. "You already have the sky half done," she encourages. "You two will have this finished in no time." Tropper also keeps an eye on the other kids in the area: Two are flopped on a couch discussing their school day, another is persuading a friend to play checkers with him, and a budding artist is painting a masterpiece that will join the artwork on the walls.

Down the hall in the "older kids' room," four 9 and 10 year olds and teacher Sophie Mazurkiewicz are working on their sewing projects. "After I finish my skirt," says one youngster proudly displaying her work, "Sophie is going to help me make a vest."

These scenarios are typical of many that take place at thousands of similar programs throughout the United States. As communities respond to the demand from working parents for safe havens for their school-age children, the number of before- and after-school programs is increasing. At last count there were 49,500 in schools, centers, churches and other community locations, serving 3.2 million children from kindergarten to eighth grade. As the programs continue to pop up throughout the United States, school-age care professionals are working hard to improve quality.

"Ten years ago, we were trailblazers just trying to get programs off the ground," says Tracey C. Ballas, president of the National School-Age Child Care Alliance in Columbus, Ohio, a network and advocacy group of school-age care professionals formed in 1986. "Now we can also focus on improving staff training and setting quality standards."

Although there are many factors that determine quality care, the best programs, like CLASP, which is run by a board of community members, educators and parents in space rented in an unused school, have basic things in common. Here are the major characteristics that let you know if your child's after-school program is top-notch

### **Sensitive, Responsive Staff**

The key to a quality program is its human relationships, according to Ballas. "Warm interaction and genuine affection between the teachers and the kids are what make a program special," she says. "The staff is the glue that holds it all together."

*Staff members engage children in meaningful activities.* A school-age program can have the most sparkling facilities in the world, but if the adults don't truly enjoy being with children, or get them involved in fun projects, youngsters won't enjoy being there. "Kids this age are hard to spark up," says Mary Kasindorf, Executive Director of CLASP. "They're sometimes wary of trying new things. They need teachers who are genuinely enthusiastic about doing something-whether it's ceramics or a ball game-and who can catch children's interest and involve them."

*They boost children's self-confidence.* Staff members should help children feel good about themselves by allowing them to initiate activities. Helping kids succeed at

whatever they do and recognizing their efforts also raises self-esteem, according to Jose V. Torres, executive director of ACT (Adults and Children in Trust), a community-based program that provides after-school care at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Lydia Brown, the program's art specialist, regularly encourages the kids with comments like "The way you mixed those colors gives the picture lots of energy" or "I see you've worked very hard on that mobile."

*Staff-child ratios are high.* Although the number of children per adult varies among programs, the best ones have enough staff members on hand so children get plenty of individual attention.

*Staff members communicate with parents.* It's important for the adults on staff to reach out to parents by finding time to talk to them and involve them in the program. At CLASE: parents regularly stop and chat with director Kasindorf and the other teachers when they pick up their kids. Kasindorf greets parents warmly by name, and often shares with them an anecdote about their child's day—anything from a great accomplishment to a discipline problem. There are also a bulletin board and a newsletter to inform parents of program happenings.

### **Wide Range of Activities**

Children are constantly following rules during the structured school day, so first-rate programs are flexible and relaxed. They give kids ample opportunity to select their own activities and engage in them at their own pace.

*Children have lots of choices.* "The last thing we want is to force kids to do something they don't want to do," says Linda Preston, executive director of BASE (Before and After School Enrichment) Camp, a program held in 15 locations in the Fort Collins, Colorado, area. "If they don't want to take part in the group art activity for the day, that's fine. We give them options that won't interfere with the main project."

On a typical afternoon at the BASE Camp at Kruse Elementary School third-grader Michael Galida, whose mom, Cheryl, is a purchasing agent at the USDA Forest Service, leaves his classroom at three and walks to the school's multipurpose room, which serves as the cafeteria during the day. He hangs up his coat, stores his book bag in a cubby and has a snack with the other children and the adult staff members. Then, if the weather is nice, Michael and his friends run around in the playground outside. But if he's not in the mood for outdoor play, he has lots of other choices: joining a group that's involved in an art project, doing homework at the "quiet table" or playing a board game.

*Projects reflect the kids' individual interests.* Quality programs also give kids a voice in creating the overall curriculum. "The best administrators create a program that's rich and responsive enough so that children can express their personalities and interests," says Michelle Seligson, who is the executive director of the School-Age Child Care Project at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College. What's the point of organizing a Wiffle-ball game if the children would much rather play Frisbee instead? Why spend money on having a weaver come to demonstrate his art when the kids would prefer to learn about printmaking?

"Kids this age are very verbal about what they like," says BASE Camp's Linda Preston, who says her staff searches out kids' preferences informally. "We ask for

feedback on games, projects or snacks. If the kids don't enjoy something, they are less likely to see it again.”

Last year, administrators at the ACT after-school program asked kids to fill out formal written evaluations. Grade-schoolers helped kindergartners who couldn't read complete the survey. Questions ranged from “Do you like the choices of things to do when you are outside?” to “Do you think the adults here care about you?”

*Activities are appropriate for different age-groups.* Since younger kids love fantasy, they should have a dress-up area for dramatic play and access to materials like clay so they can work on three-dimensional creations. Older children need opportunities to take part in activities like woodworking or photography, or something they find meaningful, such as a community-service project.

Individual activities can even be tailored to the age of the participants. For example, during potato printmaking at ACT, the art specialist cut out stamps for the youngest children, but allowed the older ones to carve their own. For the annual winter performance for parents, the kindergartners learned a simple song and marching routine, while the third, fourth, and fifth graders perfected an intricate folk dance.

### **Safe, Comfortable Surroundings**

About 20 to 30 percent of all school-based programs are housed in space designated solely for the program's use. This arrangement is ideal because the space can be personalized, children's artwork can be displayed, and ongoing projects can be left standing until they're completed. However, the majority of program directors must share rooms in schools, churches or community centers, so they have to be more creative about making the program inviting for kids. Here's what's important:

*There are separate areas for different activities.* At Kruse Elementary BASE Camp, staff members use tables that pull down from the walls to transform the school's multipurpose room into distinct sections. There's a homework area where children can sit if they need a quiet space. Staffers pull pieces of carpet, comfy pillows and a basket of books out of the storage closet to define another area where youngsters can relax and read. A table in the corner of the room is reserved for messy art projects.

*There's plenty of room for outdoor play.* Kids need to blow off steam after a hard day in the classroom. School-based programs usually have on-site playground space and equipment for children to run, jump, climb and swing. If there is no adjacent outdoor area, kids should regularly go to a nearby park or playground for outside fun.

*Staff members follow safety regulations and hygienic practices.* A good program has a sound policy to govern check-in and checkout procedures so children are always accounted for. At ACT, each counselor has a roll book, and at five p.m. a staffer signs kids out when parents pick them up. Similar precautions take place at CLASP: When a student's grandmother arrived to pick up the child, teacher Cristina Trauzzi didn't recognize her, so she checked with the office staff to make sure it was OK to release the student.

The program should also adhere to basic health and safety standards, such as making sure play equipment is secure, staff is trained in first aid, and medicines are stored out of reach. Kids shouldn't be exposed to hazardous situations, such as hot radiators, unguarded windows they could fall out of or outdoor play areas near traffic, etc. In every room at CLASP for instance, there is a box of latex gloves for staffers to use if they attend a sick or bleeding child. There's also a list of kids' allergies on the wall as well as "Rules by the Children of CLASP." The latter include: "Walk in the halls. Always wash hands before eating. Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze."

It's clear that staff members at ACT and CLASP, like other great programs across the country, truly care about their children!

## **FINDING THE BEST SUMMER PROGRAM**

Denise Fogarty, community coordinator for Child Care Aware, and other experts recommend these steps in choosing the right summer care for your school-aged child:

### **Involve your child in the decision.**

- Look for programs that focus on his or her interests.

### **Visit potential program sites or homes.**

- Do they look safe?
- Do the caregivers or staff enjoy talking and playing with children?
- Do they have CPR and safety training?
- What is their knowledge of child development?
- Do their discipline policies mesh with yours?
- How will they encourage your child's independence and build self-esteem?
- What is the ratio of adults to children? Experts recommend that in a structured program for older children, an adult not be responsible for more than 12 children.

### **Check closely into the program itself.**

- Is it certified or accredited by a professional association?
- How long has it been in operation?
- What safety measures does it implement in transporting children?
- What percentage of children return each summer?
- Check references from other parents who have used the program.

### **Continue to stay informed.**

- Drop in frequently once your child is enrolled.
- Don't even consider a program that doesn't have an open-door policy.

## SUMMER PROGRAMS FOR PRESCHOOLERS

Most summer programs, camps, and activities for toddlers and preschoolers are day programs. In evaluating which one will be best for your child, consider the following:

- **Hours:** If your child still naps, will the program allow that to continue? If you need extended care (before or after the program each day), is it available?
- **Location:** Is it convenient for someone to transport your child to and from the program?
- **Licensing:** If applicable, is the program certified or licensed?
- **Cost:** Are there any extra fees for equipment, food, materials, field trips, or other items?
- **Types of activities:** What types of activities are offered? Is your child excited about these activities?

Once you narrow down your options to two or three programs:

- Visit each site for the program and make sure they meet your standards for cleanliness and safety.
- Inquire about the ratio of children to instructors and about the training of the instructors. A good ratio for 3- and 4-year-olds is one instructor per 6 to eight children. The more potentially dangerous the activity (swimming, for example), the more supervision children need.
- Ask about the philosophy of the program and what is expected from the kids in it.
- Find out how the children are disciplined.
- Ask for names and phone numbers of parents who have enrolled children in previous summers, so you can call and ask how they and their children liked the program.



## ***HAPPY CAMPERS - CONSIDERING AN OVERNIGHT CAMP***

How exactly do you find the right summer camp for your child? Picture this: a stranger knocks on your door and says: "We've got some old cabins on a lake a hundred miles from here. Why don't I take your kids there for a couple of weeks?"

Do you tell your children to get their things together and get on the bus? Of course not. But many otherwise responsible parents will send their children to camp this summer without knowing much more about the place or the people they're entrusting their children to.

Some parents avoid a laborious quest for the perfect camp by signing their kids into local church, scouting, or YMCA camps. It's an obvious choice - familiar (Cousin Dale loved it!), close to home, what could be wrong with that? Maybe nothing. But it may also be that Cousin Dale loves slug races and runny eggs. Which brings us to rule number one in choosing a summer camp: Don't let someone else make the decision for you.

Rule number two holds that closer to home is not necessarily better. In fact, proximity can be a disadvantage. A good camp experience fosters independence and confidence away from the nest. There should be enough distance from home so that calling for a ride back to Mom and Dad is not an option. Distance also provides opportunities for kids to break old molds. If familiar faces from school populate camp, a child will be likely to fall into the same social order that has been established there.

The length of the child's stay should also be given careful consideration. A short stay, one or two weeks, doesn't allow enough time for most children to progress through the natural separation stages, from homesickness and uncertainty to confidence, pride and self-reliance. Many camps know this, and offer no program shorter than three weeks.

The very best camp experience teaches children courage, perseverance, and self-esteem. The best camps teach kids how to make friends and work in a group. They also teach many outdoor skills, such as tying knots, trimming sails, or putting a backspin on a tennis ball. The best camp will have a clear aim of what it wants to accomplish for your child, a curriculum designed to meet its goals, and methods to ensure success.

**Resources On Call** will refer you to camps that meet your needs and preferences. Factors to consider include: cost, size, gender, activities program, structure, style, staff, facilities, and, most important, the camp's philosophy and its goals for its campers.

When considering cost, don't forget to add transportation costs and any extra fees for crafts, trips, uniforms, or special programs. And keep in mind that many fine camps offer scholarships based on family income.

Some parents believe that single-sex camps allow for greater risk taking by eliminating boy-girl tensions. Others see summer camp as an ideal place to broaden the social skills of both sexes. Your child's feelings about these issues are important. If you do select a coed camp, make sure it's a place where a girl's self-esteem is valued. One way to judge is to compare the activities offered to boys with those available to girls; and how many activities are offered to both girls and boys.

Will your child want the intimacy of a small camp or the range of activities offered by a larger one? Find out if the campers live and act in small, autonomous groups. The camper-to-staff ratio is a good measure of that.

The most important thing for most children is the range of activities. Be sure those activities match your child's interests and abilities. Check for mandatory activities.

If swimming is required for two hours a day, and Sally hates the water, she may grow to detest everything about summer camp. Try to determine how well the program matches the camp's stated goals. A camp that promotes noncompetitiveness and then offers single-winner games like musical chairs is trying to sell you a bill of goods.

Perhaps your child's interests are specific - he or she may be focused on rocketry or computers. If so, you may want to look into specialty camps, a breed of summer camp born in the sixties and seventies as an alternative to the postwar athletic camps that catered to the baby boomers. Look out for camps whose programs are very narrow and repetitive. Make sure that, after a successful launch, the young rocket scientist gets to swim or sail or ride horses, and not simply as recreation but as part of a carefully planned activities program.

A camp's structure, its ownership, leadership, and its longevity, tell a lot about its philosophy. Look for a camp with a long track record and solid plans for the future. The best camps are those that have endured the test of time. Most likely, they have endured that test because their structure gives them both stability and flexibility, and because they have a clearly focused educational mission and a record of delivering what the promise.

After comparing the camps on your list and narrowing the possibilities down to three or four, you'll need to take a closer, more personal look at each camp, either through a visit, a meeting with the director, or, at the very least, a telephone call.

One of your first questions should concern the people who are going to care for your child. Ask how the camp chooses and trains its staff, and make sure the answers satisfy you. Ask about policies concerning staff-camper relationships (for example, do staff people always work in pairs when they are with campers?). Questions about the staff's educational background, experience, and turnover rate will indicate the camp's level of commitment. Always request a list of parents of former and current campers - and give some of them a call.

If you can, visit each camp. A promotional brochure or video can paint a pretty picture, but you have little way of really knowing a camp until you walk through the campus. If that's not possible, a good way of assessing the camp's facilities is to ask the director how much money is spent on maintenance, renovation, and new construction each year, and what improvements are planned for the future.

While you're talking to the director be sure to ask about care and feeding. Is the entire staff trained in health, safety, and emergency situations? What plans are in place for an emergency in camp? Is there an infirmary and a nurse or doctor on hand? Who plans the menu and who prepares the food? Are the kitchen and dining facilities adequate? Are provisions made for special diets?

Consider all the above, but in the end, trust your intuition. If the camp is right for your child, it will *feel* right, and you will be making a decision that will affect your child in more positive ways than you can imagine - not just for three weeks this summer but for all year and every year.

## HOW TO SELECT QUALITY AFTER-SCHOOL CARE

No matter what type of school-age child care arrangement you consider, a sports program, a youth club, a community service program, look for these three basic ingredients of quality:

- a safe, protective environment
- the opportunity for your child to form stable relationships with caring adults and other children
- interesting, engaging activities appropriate to your child's age.

You need to visit and assess school-age childcare programs. You should view the facilities, talk to the adult caregivers or supervisors, and get a very good idea of how your child would be spending his or her time.

### **In every case, you should observe the program in action.**

- Do the caregivers/supervisors like their work?
- Do they have special training that helps them understand children your child's age?
- Are they friendly and involved with children?
- Is there sufficient attention to health and safety?
- Do they tailor activities to meet the children's interests?
- Are their activities there that would interest and engage your child?

### **MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE: PUT YOURSELF IN YOUR CHILD'S SHOES**

Regardless of age, there is an important, useful rule of thumb when selecting a childcare arrangement: if you had your child's interests and talents, *would you want to be there?* Parental expertise is the key to a child's satisfaction with a school-age childcare program; parents can best judge their child's abilities, interests, and personality.

### **Some steps to consider when choosing an arrangement**

- List your son's or daughter's interests, favorite activities, personality traits, strengths, weaknesses, etc.
- Involve your child. What would he or she like to do? If kids are not involved, they may "vote with their feet" and leave a program. Involvement in this decision helps kids learn to participate in family decision-making.
- Speak with your child's teacher. Perhaps he or she has particular insights into your child's preferences.
- After assessing your child's characteristics and interests, observe a program. Watch what is going on through your child's eyes, and then ask your child to observe it too.

## **WHAT TO LOOK FOR**

### **Age-appropriate activities**

It is critical to recognize that school-age children come in different ages and stages with widely varying interests. As children develop physically, their improved motor skills and coordination enable them to take on more challenges. As they gain more of a sense of themselves, their needs change, too. They may require less structure and may prefer independent activity. While 6-year-olds may enjoy block-building or story time and benefit most from being in a group of kids close to the same age, preteens may want to try fashioning clay into a coffee mug, or compete in team sports, or do homework or research. Older children should be given the option to work or play independently.

When considering a program, make sure that there are lots of projects, activities and games from which to choose, all geared to particular age groups. Visit the program's gymnasium: if your daughter is an 8-year-old athlete, her equipment and supervision requirements will be quite different than those of a 14-year-old gymnast. Your son with a talent for painting might want to check out the art supplies with you. If he's a 6-year-old artist, the easels and other materials should be geared to his size, and of course, the paints and other supplies should be non-toxic (and washable!). If he's a 13-year-old budding sculptor, the program instruction, supervision and supplies must be gauged accordingly. The more dangerous materials a teenage artist might employ should not be accessible to the younger children at the same center, if the program attracts a wide age range.

Age appropriateness also extends to the reading corner or room, where books that appeal to all age levels should be accessible. Culturally sensitive, nonsexist materials that reflect varying ethnic and racial backgrounds are highly desirable.

Depending on a child's inclination and age, there should be designated areas for studying and homework, lounging and arts and crafts projects. For example, the exceptional "Wise Guys" (wise guys are 10-12 years old) Kids Club in Edina, MN has a music room, computer room, homework room, quiet room and art room. Also, safe outdoor playground areas with equipment (e.g., swings, slides, etc.) and basketball courts or a soccer field are optimal, but a nearby park can suffice. Younger children have to be escorted to and from outdoor spaces, of course, and supervised more closely at play than older children.

Group projects - writing and producing newsletters, designing and painting murals, etc. - are terrific activities for school-age programs. These activities help stimulate cooperation, social interaction, and working together to achieve a common goal. A choice of projects or clubs provides similar benefits to the children.

School-age children can be involved in community service projects. An after-

school program for children in grades K-6 in South Brunswick, New Jersey has included making gifts for the homeless and crocheting a quilt for a local AIDS hospice. Youths attending the Spokane, Washington YWCA program - exclusively for homeless children who are charged no fees - provided a community service by cleaning up a park and planting. They've been granted "official park passes" with a photo ID.

Also, ample free time should be classified as an activity. A child's day is so chock full of structure, walking in single file lines, sitting still, remaining quiet, taking instruction, that free time is a welcome addition to his or her day. A well-rounded program will allow the children to take the initiative to read or study, to play or just plain relax.

### **Engaging responsive staff who listen**

Just as in a childcare center or family childcare home, an engaging, *responsive* staff is a strong indicator of a good, quality school-age program. Thirteen year olds suffer just as much as toddlers if they are ignored or dismissed by staff; parents should look for adults who treat all the children fairly, regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic level, etc. Teachers and staff who are genuinely enthusiastic about children and can spark their interests enhance any program.

Direct and open communication from staff to parents is extremely important. Staff should get to know parents as well as their child - program open houses, send newsletters or post information on bulletin boards, and schedule regular meetings to encourage communication and the exchange of ideas.

### **Parent involvement**

Parents are the heart of any program. The school-age childcare movement arose out of the needs of working parents. Researchers have found that once a program has been in operation, parent involvement is essential to maintaining quality and stability. Involvement can stem from the communications parents maintain with the staff.

### **Accessibility**

In a perfect world, all school-age childcare would be affordable and available at school or with free bus transportation provided.

Convenient hours are an additional feature to investigate. Is the facility open both before and after school? During holidays and vacations? Can the program accommodate children with parents who work evening shifts or odd hours? Find out if there is a penalty for late arrival after work, and, if so, how the fines are charged.

### **SAFETY SECURITY AND HEALTH MATTERS**

As a security measure, children's arrivals and departures to the facility must be supervised. The identity of the parent or guardian responsible for dropping off and

picking up the child should be well established with program staff. Access to the facility by persons who are not related to the children should be severely restricted and monitored.

A well-stocked first aid kit should be close at hand. Protecting the good health of all children should be a goal. Handwashing and disinfection should be part of the on-going routines used to discourage the spread of germs. The staff and children should be schooled in emergency procedures such as fire drills and action in the event of a natural disaster. When children go off-site, vehicles used to transport them must be safe and all drivers must maintain good driving records.

Healthful snacks and/or meals should be served. After school, “snack” is often the first activity - either eating it or making it! In Fairfax, California, the young attendees of the San Anselmo Children's Center plant and cultivate their own vegetable gardens, integrating a fun activity with proper nutrition, and some valuable biology and agriculture lessons besides.

## **HIKERS OR HACKERS? CHOOSING THE RIGHT CAMP FOR YOUR CHILD**

There are a lot more camps to choose from these days. As a result, your choice of camps is far more interesting, but also potentially more difficult.

### **WHAT'S AVAILABLE?**

You must first decide whether your child is better suited to a day camp or a resident camp. A day camp, from which your child comes home every afternoon, is especially good for a young camper who may be nervous about being away from home. Some day camps even use facilities - such as a local high school or a nearby college - that may already be familiar to your child. Resident camps offer meals and lodging and run from one to four weeks.

*Traditional camps* offer a variety of activities - archery, crafts, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, and swimming. The idea, says Bruce Johnson, whose family has owned one such camp in Northern California, is to expose kids to a full range of activities - from gathering eggs in the hen house to learning how to groom and saddle a horse.

*Specialty camps* continue to grow in number. In addition to sports camps that offer instruction in soccer, baseball, or basketball, today there are camps for young surfers, roller-skating enthusiasts, and kayakers. While most sports camps are limited in focus, academic camps frequently offer more diverse programs. A marine camp in San Diego, for example, includes a trip to Sea World and Boogie board lessons in addition to biology and marine science instruction.

*Environmental or community service camps* could be the wave of the future. At these camps, young teens blaze wilderness trails, teach reading in Appalachia, build schools in Mexico - the possibilities are endless. One such camp weighs the food scraps that are left over after one of the first meals and encourages campers to figure out ways to utilize the leftovers or to reduce them.

### **HOW TO PICK A CAMP**

Begin by including your child in the discussion. "Summer camp shouldn't be reform school," says Gary Abell of the nonprofit American Camping Association. "Talk about the choices. Make sure the camp selected is the one your child wants to go to, not one you wish you could have gone to as a kid."

## QUESTIONS TO ASK

After you've narrowed your selection, ask for references in your area - then ask those people for additional references. As one camp owner we talked with said, "Most of the good camps depend on repeat business. So ask the parents if they'd send their kid back to that camp. If they would, that's a good sign."

You should also ask questions of the camp directors. Is the camp accredited? How long has it been in operation? How large is its enrollment? What sort of food service does the camp have? What are the sleeping and bathroom arrangements? What kind of medical service is available? Many resident camps are accredited by the ACA, but many day camps as well as some start-up ventures, are not. When checking out camps not yet accredited, you should ask how comprehensive its medical and liability insurance is, and what the credentials and qualifications of administrators and counselors are.

Asking questions about the staff can be equally helpful. What is the ratio of counselors to campers? (For resident camps, the ACA recommends 1 adult staff member to every 6 nondisabled campers ages 7 and 8; 1 counselor to 8 campers ages 9 through 14; and 1 counselor to 10 campers ages 15 through 17.) What are the ages of the counselors? (At least 80 percent should be 18 or older.) What is their training, and what are the staff's philosophies on discipline, homesickness, and sports competition?

Finally, take your time making your decision. You shouldn't rush into a decision for its own sake. Says camp adviser Lois Levine, "There are very few terrible camps. But there are plenty of camps that simply aren't right for your child. So take the time to get all your questions answered, and make sure both you and your child feel comfortable with the final selection."



## PICK A CHAMP OF A CAMP

*Sending your child to overnight camp? Make your choice a good one by asking lots of questions first.*

Did you willingly eat cauliflower at summer camp? Or discuss global warming and world issues? Or, in your wildest dreams, recycle?

That's camp today. It's toned, trimmed, and tailored from the rustic experience we once knew into a caring, sharing experience with a nineties label - and oftentimes a price tag that resembles college tuition.

You want to choose carefully. To help you, we spoke with directors of camps across the South (most of them private camps) to determine some good starter questions. Use these, as well as your own, and ask away. Remember, don't stop until you're satisfied.

**What are the camp's goals and philosophies?** “We focus on individualism,” says Blake Smith of La Junta (for boys, ages 6-14) in Hunt, Texas. “And self-confidence. Boys don't compete with one another.”

**Describe your staff and the camper-to-counselor ratio.** Frank Bell of Tuxedo, North Carolina's, Mondamin (for boys) and Green Cove (for girls) says, “Our ratio is 3.5 to 1, but you need to ask more. How does a camp choose counselors? We require references and an interview.”

**How are counselors trained?** “Ours go through CPR training, emergency procedures, and counseling techniques,” reports Leslie Etheredge, of Camp Winnataska, near Pell City, Alabama. “We talk about being positive with children, how to encourage them, and ways to include even the shiest children in activities.”

**Are the campers' days structured, or do they choose activities?** “Our girls concentrate on a choice of a half dozen activities - horseback riding, gymnastics, pottery, drama, and outdoors whitewater canoeing, rappelling,” says Jerry Stone, of Rockbrook Camp, Brevard, North Carolina. Smith from La Junta adds, “Our day is structured, but the boys select their own activities. And like college, activities are different on alternate days.”

**Are your sports competitive or noncompetitive?** “Children are going through a lot of changes in life,” says Dr. H. W. Boyd, of Gwynn Valley, Brevard, North Carolina (boys and girls, K-5). “Some camps feel you need prizes to be successful. We're noncompetitive - there's enough pressure for them already.”

**Is a long session better than a short one?** “We find that kids reach a comfort zone after two weeks away from home,” reports Smith at La Junta. “They've achieved a level of self-reliance and seem to take off from there. Two-week sessions offer a good experience, but four-week sessions magnify independence.”

**Do you allow sugar and caffeine?** “We don't even have a canteen at camp, and we ask parents not to send sugary treats,” says Boyd at Gwynn Valley (where, incidentally, children gobbled down brussel sprouts and cauliflower at lunch).

**How about rainy day plans?** “We've learned that skin is waterproof,” says Bell at Mondamin/Green Cove. “A bit of rain doesn't slow us down.” Winnataska's Etheredge says, “We have a definite rainy day plan - crafts and games in the gym.”

**Will you supply references?** “We provide biographies of all staff members,” says Mondamin/Green Cove's Bell. “We also supply a sheet with a couple of dozen references. If you're from a town where we have other campers, we send their names.”

**What's your refund policy?** The camps varied in their approach to pre-session refunds, but were unanimous in the no-refund policy once camp has begun. “We don't refund - even if the camper gets homesick and goes home,” said several directors.

**What's a specialty camp?** We encountered several of these “new breed” theme camps. National Law Camp, intended for 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders interested in legal careers, hosts its two-week session at American University in Washington, D.C.; Florida Air Academy's six week program in Melbourne is mostly academic and military (flight training available), with side trips to Disney World, Kennedy Space Center, and Busch Gardens as weekend treats. And Legacy International combines traditional camp activities with sessions on world issues, environmental concerns, and social change. Campers from countries around the globe coexist on the hillsides near Bedford, Virginia. You can also send your child to camps focusing on weight loss and on sports.

**What does the American Camping Association accreditation mean?** “Accredited camps have met or exceeded up to 300 nationally recognized standards,” explains ACA's Ruth Lister. “The standards represent issues critical to the health and safety of campers and staff.”

## **CAMP NOTES**

Other questions to consider: How many campers/counselors to a cabin? Indoor plumbing? Field trips? Doctor or nurse in residence? Are parents notified immediately when a child is ill or injured? Do campers come from the immediate region or a geographic spread? If a coed camp, is there supervised mingling? Is there emphasis on religion? What sort of child benefits most from your camp?

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT CAMP

Three summers ago, after my nine year old daughter and I had paged through dozens of brochures and watched a stack of videos all featuring smiling campers in idyllic settings, we left Manhattan for a three day, 700 mile tour of Vermont, hoping to make sense of the vast array of choices. We were like a couple of Fresh Air kids on the lam, making an impromptu twilight visit to an old drive in theater, buying armloads of maple syrup and fresh vegetables at a roadside stand and even coming to appreciate the earthy aroma of cow manure. Along the way, we also found a terrific camp that Meagan has attended for the past two summers.

Finding the right sleep-away camp for your child is not unlike selecting a private school or a good riding stable. You gather facts, survey other parents, interview the director and make a decision based on a combination of information and intuition. With after-school educational or enrichment programs, the family can gather under the same roof each night to share impressions. But with sleep-away camp, “You are putting your child totally in the care of strangers, for an extended period of time - in a place where they're joining in activities they wouldn't normally be a part of” says John Miller, executive vice president of the American Camping Association. As a result, says Rodger Popkin, owner/director of Blue Star Camps in Hendersonville, North Carolina, “A parent’s relationship with a camp is not a commercial one, it's an act of faith.”

That is why it is so important that, after obtaining as much information as possible, you: trust your instincts about which camp is best suited to your child's personality and interests as well as your family's style and values. Indeed, when all the possibilities are similar, it may be the intangibles that make the difference. For instance, at one camp Meagan and I visited, the grounds were immaculate and the activities superb, but the director, a knowledgeable and likable man, spent much of our tour picking up tiny bits of debris and complaining about the campers' carelessness. While his camp was a model of efficiency, his obsession with a relatively minor matter made me wonder how sensitively he would handle more serious issues. Everything else seemed fine, but my instincts told me to keep looking.

On our next stop, we visited a camp where the grounds were muddy from a week's worth of rain and the cabins were, well, rustic. But the girls were beaming. They greeted us with self-assurance, poise and friendliness. The camp directors, a husband and wife team, sought out Meagan's opinions and encouraged her questions. There was something intangible about this place, too - the atmosphere just *felt* right.

Visiting a camp the summer before you plan to send your child there can be one of the best ways to determine its philosophy and see how it is put into practice. Inspecting the cabins and eating the food can also help your child develop realistic expectations. And witnessing smiling faces in a simple setting or somber faces in an elaborate one can be much more meaningful than hours of armchair fantasizing. But if it is not possible to view a camp in operation, there are other steps you can take to gather the necessary information to make your choice with confidence.

Resources On will do much of the legwork for you. We can spare you a lot of phone calls (and a lot of junk mail) by helping to narrow your choices, after determining your needs and preferences regarding location, length and timing of the sessions, religious affiliation and range of activities offered.

Camp fairs, at which directors display brochures and videos and answer questions, can also be helpful for “getting a feel” for a variety of camps. These fairs are

usually held at private schools on winter weekends. After you've skimmed a few brochures with glossy photos of sparkling lakes and well-groomed horses, invite a few directors over. "People always want to meet us in the flesh, so they know who'll be caring for their kids," says Allen L. Sigoloff, who runs Camp Thunderbird for Boys in Bemidji, Minnesota.

Most camp directors crisscross the country during the off-season, meeting prospective charges and their parents. "You should think twice if the director or another senior camp employee doesn't offer to come meet you in person," warns Sigoloff. When geography or timing does not permit a face-to-face visit, camp directors will often dispatch their assistants or a seasoned cabin counselor who lives in your area.

When that meeting takes place, watch how the director or his representative interacts with your child. Does he treat his or her questions with respect or does he direct his conversation to you and/or your spouse? Does he try to see solicit your child's views and concerns or is he more interested in doing the talking?

Perhaps the most difficult part of the process is trying to determine the subtle ways in which one camp differs from another. That's why it's a good idea to prepare a mental or written list of questions, so you're certain to compare and contrast prospective camps on the same basis. "Every brochure says kids are treated as individuals in a warm, nurturing setting," says Rodger Popkin, who runs Blue Star with his wife Candy. But each place, of course, has its own distinct flavor, philosophy or specialty. Some camps emphasize challenge and competition through sports; others focus on developing interpersonal skills through activities. One may provide a structured experience; another may allow children to choose their own activities.

How, then, do you determine which camp will best suit your child's needs and interests? "You have to ask a lot of questions - some tough ones - to find out what a camp's value structure is," says Popkin. "It has to have something that transcends the fact that you're living in cabins with strangers and eating food you didn't select. That something can be friendship, athleticism or spirituality. If not, camp is like a bad resort with mediocre food."

The ACA's John Miller suggests that parents question camp directors carefully and listen for certain buzzwords. If the director stresses intracamp competitions, such as color wars (in which the camp is divided between two competing factions) or medals and trophies, the camp may impose more pressure on your child than you had in mind. If you hear repeated mentions of religious ceremonies, inspirational readings or community service, chances are the focus is on building values - which can be fine, as long as those values are in line with your own.

In addition to your own list of questions, Miller and others knowledgeable about how camps are operated suggest that parents always inquire about the following:

- **Camp accreditation.** If a camp has accreditation from the ACA, an eighty-four-year-old, not for profit, independent camp review body, "It means the directors or owners are confident enough about their programs to open them to inspection by their peers," says Miller. It also means that the camp has met 277 health and safety criteria covering such things as the director's background, food storage and preparation, and the qualifications of the medical staff. The ACA applies additional safety standards to camps offering aquatics, horseback riding and overnight excursions. There are, however, some fine camps that are not accredited by the ACA. Their directors, like Nathan Thompson, who has run the well-respected Camp Carolina in Brevard, North

Carolina for thirty-four years, usually opt to meet state or local regulations instead. “It’s not because we think we know everything,” says Thompson. “It’s just that we felt the North Carolina Private Camp Association met our needs better.” Families considering nonaccredited camps should know, however, that state and local guidelines vary greatly. Ask about what is covered in the inspection and approval process - and what is not. Similarly, don’t assume that appreciably lower rates automatically mean that a camp offers inferior facilities or programs. Regional differences and other factors allow some camps to package a topnotch experience at a comparatively inexpensive price.

- **The camp director’s background.** Education in child development and recreation is essential, says John Miller, as is extensive experience in camp management. “Ask questions about what motivated the director to enter the business and how long he’s been in it,” he adds. The answers can be illuminating. Good camp directors won’t flinch at the toughest of questions. If their answers are vague or evasive, think twice. On the other hand, if they radiate warmth even though their answers are less eloquent, that candor and engaging manner should count for something.
- **Counselor selection and training.** Experts say that the ideal camp staff is a mix of new and returning employees. Key positions, such as those involving the supervision of greener staff members and overseeing swimming, boating or riding activities, ought to be filled by the most experienced people - preferably those who have a long association with the camp. *All* counselors should have child-development backgrounds, first-aid training and expertise in the sport or arts class they’ll be teaching. Ask how selections are made and if counselors from overseas are interviewed in person. It’s always smart to inquire about whether background checks, resumes and references are required. Cheryl Hanson, who with her husband Bob operates Camp Farwell in Newbury, Vermont, also suggests asking questions about the type of orientation counselors receive. “Is orientation week a time for putting boats in the water and a fresh coat of paint on the lodge, or do counselors get instruction in working with kids and groups?” she asks.
- **Counselor-to-camper ratio.** The ACA recommends that camps employ one counselor for every five campers ages seven and eight; one counselor for every eight campers ages nine to 15; and one counselor for every ten campers 15 and older. A higher counselor-to-camper ratio generally means that your child will receive more individualized attention and can be a deciding factor between two camps of equal appeal.

- **Percentage of returning campers.** Ideally, more than 60 percent of the campers should be returning from the previous year, says Miller. (Return rates at specialty camps, which a child may attend for only a year or two to gain or polish a specific skill, may be lower.) A high return rate at a traditional camp assures some stability in the group and offers seasoned campers a chance to move up to leadership positions. “If a camp is having a difficult time getting a significant number of campers to come back, it may signal a problem,” says Miller.
- **Procedures for routine medical needs and emergencies.** In addition to having written procedures for handling medical emergencies, the camp should have a nurse or other medical personnel on staff, and all employees in contact with campers should have first aid training. Since camps tend to be in remote areas, there should be a clear, written policy spelling out how campers are transported and accompanied when they need more medical attention than the camp can provide. Ask where the nearest hospital and pediatrician are located. Inquire about past accidents; have the director recount an example of a routine or emergency medical situation from the preceding year and how it was handled.
- **Sexual-misconduct record.** Unfortunately, there is no clearinghouse that can readily provide information about a camp's record regarding complaints or incidents of sexual abuse. Don't be shy: Ask the director about any allegations against his camp. Nowadays, such questions are anticipated, but don't look for the director to bring up the topic. He should, however, be forthright, and comfortable explaining camp policy on sexual misconduct. Parents can expect that all reputable camps have trained their employees about what constitutes inappropriate contact between staff and campers. The camp should also have a clearly defined policy that prohibits counselors from ever being alone with a child. If a director's answers leave you less than satisfied, you should investigate further. The local health department, Better Business Bureau or county sheriff's or prosecutor's office may be able to provide the information you seek. But even if you just get an uneasy feeling you can't quite articulate, you may want to go on to the next camp on your list.
- **Parent communications.** Many camps impose a "blackout" on calls during the first week of a child's hitch, when homesickness can run high; others prohibit children from calling their parents for the duration of their stay. Either way, parents should be able to call the camp at any time to get reports about their kids. “We have three people in the office who do nothing but field calls from parents during the summer,” says Blue Star's Rodger Popkin. If you and your child need a lot of contact and the camp stresses cutting ties, it might not be right for your family. Ask about whether campers are encouraged to write or call during a specific time each week. And find out about how homesickness is handled.
- **Special concerns.** The more specific you can be about your individual concerns, the more information you'll gather. “Ask ‘What if’ questions,” suggests the ACA's John Miller. If, for example, you have reservations about group dynamics, have the director explain his approach to resolving conflict among children in a cabin. Raise an issue using a specific scenario. You might ask something like, “What do you do if a child wakes up crying, because he's afraid of lightning?” If you're wondering about how a new camper will fit in with an established group, ask how novices are made to feel at home. If your child has special needs - say, she requires asthma medication - the camp should be able to spell out in advance how it will attend to those needs.

- **References.** Most camps willingly provide the names and phone numbers of alumni families, typically campers and parents who have good things to say about the place. But a call or visit with a fellow parent - or, better yet, a family visit in which a former camper and a prospective one can meet - often yields candid and invaluable perspectives on the day-to-day experience of a specific camp.

There may be no precise formula for finding the right match for your child, but parents of veteran campers say that after all the touring, reading and interviewing, there is usually a gut feeling that points the way. If you think you've identified a strong candidate but still have reservations, call the camp director and say just that. You may begin with something like, "We're all impressed with what we've seen and heard, but we're still uncomfortable with your policy on phone calls. What can we do to clear that last hurdle?" If the director doesn't come up with a good compromise or persuasive rationale for that policy, your reservations may have been well founded. If, on the other hand, he addresses your concerns with openness and empathy, you may be set to have sweatshirts, nametags and mosquito repellent ordered up.

Chances are, your hard work will result in a long and productive association with a camp director and staff who will help provide your child with a sense of accomplishment and independence - not to mention the seedlings of lifelong friendships. "You will know when the match is right, even though you may not be able to articulate why," says Rodger Popkin. "It's like falling in love."

## MAKING IT WORK

As parents, there are steps you can take to help insure that your children get off to a great start in their after-school programs:

- Before the first day at the program, talk with the director or staff about your children's likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, health or dietary needs, or any special circumstances.
- Keep the lines of communication open.
- Try to talk to a staff member at least once a week. Bring up any questions or concerns and ask about the new things your children are learning and doing.
- Pass the staff's compliments on to your children, and add lots of your own.

Beyond that, here are some "rules" for making sure you have a great relationship with your children's care providers:

- Pick up your children on time. It's unfair to your children and the staff when you cause them to wait around after hours.
- Set aside time for dealing with problems. Avoid the end of the day. If possible, schedule an appointment or phone conference to talk with staff or director.
- Stay involved. Make time to attend parent meetings, family/staff get-togethers or performances by the children. Offer to serve on an advisory board or to donate supplies or your time.

In the right program, children will be spending their hours and days outside of school happy, involved, and secure. And you, as a family, will come out far, far ahead.



## **BIG ENOUGH FOR DAY CAMP?**

The full-color brochure is enticing: pictures of happy children swimming in a clear blue lake, sitting in a circle around a guitar-playing counselor, raising their arms in victory as a teammate slides into home plate. But if you look closely at these familiar glossies, you may notice that some of the kids wearing camp T-shirts are only 3 or 4 years old.

Preschools have long offered summer programs for children who are enrolled during the school year. But in recent years day camps that once catered to school-age kids have started inviting children as young as 3 to get on big yellow buses and head off to the great outdoors.

Now that day camp is available for preschoolers how can you tell if your child is ready for the experience? And if she is how can you be sure that you are choosing the right camp? To a large extent, parents can rely on their own intuition about their child's readiness. There's a good chance that if your child is ready for preschool she's ready for day camp as well.

"Separation anxiety is the biggest problem for children this age" says David Schmuckler, a family therapist in Saratoga Springs, New York. Camps rarely provide the slow introduction that preschools do. But a good camp will work together with parents to ease the transition. Once separation anxiety is overcome - and for most children it fades within a week - day camp can be a terrific experience.

Even those children who have difficulty behaving at preschool may do beautifully at day camp. The emphasis on outdoor activity, the high tolerance for noise and the lack of "academic" pressure are ideal for kids who have trouble harnessing their enthusiasm in a classroom.

Day camp can also be a useful bridge for children entering kindergarten. "It was the best thing in the world for my daughter" says Susan Geraghty of Saratoga Springs New York. "Lena got used to riding on the bus, meeting new kids and trying new experiences. Starting public school was a snap."

When trying to decide if their child is ready for camp, however, parents need to consider that long days or constant activity are too much for some preschoolers. Many young children require more downtime than they are likely to get at day camp. Some may feel anxious about the seemingly endless flow of different children, who may stay for a few weeks and then not return for the next session. And some may be intimidated by the school buses many camps provide. "When Nellie was 5, she insisted that she was ready for camp," recalls Helen Golden of New York City. "But she refused to get on a bus without us. We decided not to force the issue and signed her up for the summer program at her nearby preschool instead."

Parents who are uncertain about full-time camp for their child may want to find a program that offers half-day or twice-a-week sessions. Signing up your child with a friend is another way to ease the transition for an almost ready preschooler. And some children may feel more comfortable in a setting that is already familiar.

Summer programs at your church or synagogue can be a wonderful first camp experience. But keep in mind, counsels Schmuckler, that "day camp is not a necessity for preschoolers. You can always try again next summer."

Assessing a small child's readiness for camp is only the first step. The next is assessing a camp's readiness for small children.

Think back to that brochure. The child sliding into home plate makes a great

picture, but can you imagine your preschooler doing it? Such win/lose activities can be extremely stressful for young children.

The ideal setup is a camp that has separate facilities and staff for small children. At Camp Riverbend, Warren Township, New Jersey, which recently started admitting 3 year olds, the younger campers have their own pool, as well as their own more relaxed schedule and early childhood teachers as counselors.

“The little ones do the same things as the older kids, but everything is modified,” says Harold Breene, the camp's owner and director. “They play mini golf with rubber clubs, they play tennis with lower nets and Nerf balls. Most of all, we have a noncompetitive approach.”

The best programs for very young children, whether or not they have separate facilities, concentrate on go-at-your-own-pace activities, such as art projects and nature walks. When more competitive activities are part of the program, counselors make sure that all participants are cheered loudly. Waterfront programs focus on games and gentle encouragement, not formal lessons.

Good camps also respect young children's need for frequent snacks, a time and a place for rest, toilets and sinks they can use themselves, and loving hands to hold when they are lonely, scared, or sad.

The counseling staff is just as important as the activities and physical surroundings. Some camps, particularly low-budget town playgrounds, employ mainly high-school students, who can have a difficult time juggling the needs of a group of preschoolers. Others hire certified teachers and experienced college students. Don't hesitate to ask about the qualifications of counselors. In addition, find out the ratio of counselors to campers. There are no national standards, but it is reasonable to expect a camp to meet the ratios set in your state for preschools.

If you're trying to decide among several camps and one of them has been accredited by the American Camping Association, strongly consider its advantages. This accreditation assures you that rigorous safety and program standards have been met. Because of the time and cost involved in qualifying, many fine camps do not apply; only 25 percent of day camps nationwide are accredited. If you choose a nonaccredited camp, though, make sure to check out safety standards. Camps that are secure about their safety records will be happy to respond to your questions.

Finding a good camp for a small child requires asking lots of questions, but for children who are ready for the rich experience, the search is worth it. In many ways, day camp offers children something close to an old-fashioned summer vacation. You may not be able to wander the woods with your child in search of salamanders, but at least your child, in the company of friends and counselors, can spend her days creating memories she will never forget.

### **Safety checklist**

If you are considering sending your child to a camp that is not accredited by the American Camping Association, check with the director to make sure the camp meets these safety standards.

- Playground equipment is well maintained, age-appropriate, and on a soft surface, such as wood chips.
- Sports equipment has been modified for small children; for example golf clubs are made of rubber.
- Protective gear, such as helmets and pads, is required for biking and skating.
- Waterfront supervision is sufficient: A lifeguard certified by the Red Cross, the YMCA, or the equivalent, must be present whenever children swim in lakes or non-kiddie pools.
- A “health manager” who is certified in CPR and first aid and can administer medicine is present at all times.
- A nearby doctor and hospital are officially on standby for emergencies.
- Vans and buses are equipped with adequate seat belts - and they are always used.
- Brown-bag lunches and snacks are refrigerated to avoid food poisoning.

## TOO YOUNG FOR OVERNIGHT CAMP?

When is a child ready for sleep-away camp? The ideal age is about nine, camp directors and other experts suggest, although several believe that sometimes boys need an extra year of maturing before they're emotionally equipped to handle an extended stint away from home. Presumably, a child is suitably prepared for camp if he has successfully stayed at friends' houses for weekends or is comfortable visiting with relatives for several days at a time. Other indicators are an open attitude toward new experiences and ease in groups.

“There is no magic age at which a child is ready for camp,” contends Nath Thompson, director of Camp Carolina in Brevard, North Carolina. “It can be anywhere between six and 15. But if a kid hasn't started by about 12 or 13, you may have missed the boat, because he could be more reluctant to try something new.”

If your child has always been overly cautious, if he has a history of keeping close to home or if he has had a bad experience staying away from home, you will want to choose a sleep-away camp with particular care. The director ought to be made aware of your concerns and should work with you on a plan for giving your child extra support and encouragement as he eases into the camp's routine.

Some children, especially those who are extremely shy or don't enjoy outdoor activities, may simply be temperamentally unsuited for camp. Parents of such youngsters shouldn't force the issue or use camp as a “sink-or-swim” approach to what they see as a child's developmental shortcomings. Camp should be a lot of things; traumatic isn't one of them.

## HOME ALONE?

As children progress through their school -age years, the question of when it is appropriate to allow them to care for themselves inevitably arises. It is a question without an easy answer - there is no "perfect age" at which a child is ready for self-care. Maturity, length of time alone, access to help in an emergency and many other factors enter into the equation. The following opinions raise the issues to consider when thinking about whether *your* child is ready to be "home alone."

While many people think that 12- or 13-year-olds are capable of being home alone before and after school, there's really no magic age. Think seriously about the safety of your neighborhood, the distance between the school and your home, and your child's personality and maturity. If you have even the slightest doubt that you child would be safe and responsible, trust your instincts and either continue with before- and after-school care or find another safe haven, such as a neighborhood youth center or parks and recreation department program.

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No kid should be left alone on a regular basis until he or she is developmentally ready, and that differs from child to child. Eleven is the youngest, but if a child is not ready, being left alone at 11 is scary. Giving courses and information to children younger than 11 only gives a parent a false sense of security. They think their child is safe but research shows these children don't retain the information. Children should know how to react in an emergency, but we shouldn't sell the fact they have information as an alternative."

*\*MICHELLE SELIGSON, director of the School-Age Child Care Project at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College\**

I would say 9- to 12-year-old kids with adequate preparation do and can succeed in caring for themselves. But while age is an important concern, there are many other criteria that must be of equal concern. For example, the level of home and neighborhood safety systems and supports, the level of social skills of the child; and access to emergency supports."

*\*NEIL COLAN, associate director of the Center on Work and Family at Boston University\**

Most health professionals agree children below the age of 8 should not be left alone for extended periods of time, but young people who are at risk because of limited ability, medical conditions or emotional problems should not be left alone under any circumstances. We make it difficult for parents to make such decisions when the media and advertisers treat children as competent to deal with everything from realistic violence to misleading advertising.”

*\*DAVID ELKIND, professor of child study at the Eliot Pearson Department of Child Study at Tufts University\**

Learning to be left alone is one of the tasks of growing up, but age is not a perfect predictor of when it should happen. Research shows between the ages of 8 and 10, parents start leaving kids alone for short periods of time, 5 minutes, half an hour. National studies show 5 percent of 10 year olds are left alone regularly, meaning five hours a week or less. Our studies show that success is more likely to be achieved when a child is alone for less than five hours a week.”

*\*CHRISTINE TODD, associate professor of child development at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign\**

## SUMMER SAFETY

All children love outdoor activities in the summer, but the warm weather and sunshine bring a number of hazards for which you and your child's caregivers or counselors should be prepared.

**Sun.** We've waited all winter for the arrival of the nice warm sun, but children, like adults, need protection from its damaging rays. Children older than six months should wear sunscreen when playing outdoors, and should be encouraged to wear hats and sunglasses as well. Infants younger than six months cannot use sunscreen and should be kept out of direct sun.

**Heat.** Children should be encouraged to drink water or other appropriate beverages frequently, and caregivers should be alert to the signs of overheating and dehydration. Common sense should prevail: on those searingly hot days, vigorous play in direct sunlight may not be a good idea.

**Insect Bites and Stings.** Since children don't know how to behave around the many insects of summer, parents and caregivers have to provide the guidance. Avoiding likely breeding grounds and nesting areas is important, as is clothing that protects as much of the body as possible.

**Water Safety.** Children should never be left alone in the vicinity of water for a moment. When using public pools, lakes and other swimming facilities, a lifeguard must be on duty to ensure safety. If a child is in a group situation, a day camp for example, very high staff-to-child ratios should apply for water safety.

## FIGHTING HOMESICKNESS

For novice and veteran campers alike, braving a bout of homesickness is almost as much a rite of passage as learning a camp song with lyrics that could drive a parent crazy. But natural though it may be to miss mom and dad, at its worst, homesickness can be a lonely and frightening experience. Thankfully, there are ways to minimize its intensity.

In the months before your child leaves for sleep-away camp, try to find a day camp program that offers a sleepover at the end of the session, suggests Becca Cowan Johnson, a clinical psychologist in Santa Cruz, California, and a former camp director. She also recommends that parents of first-timers look for a day camp with a one- or two-week session instead of a four- or eight-week camp.

Among other cures for this particular brand of the summertime blues:

- Enroll your child in a late-summer session and visit the camp while the earlier session is in full swing. That way your child can meet the staff and some of his prospective bunkmates.
- Write or fax a letter to the camp director to get answers to your son or daughter's last minute worries. If your child develops an eleventh-hour fear of snakes, for instance, you can get a quick answer to put his mind at ease. A letter full of questions is a great way to minimize the number of unknowns.
- Consider having your child attend camp with a friend. If she can be assured of having at least one person she knows around, she'll have an answer to the most common question that dogs neophytes: "Will there be anyone to play with?"
- Bring souvenirs of home. Most camps suggest packing a favorite toy, pillow or blanket. Some suggest photos of family members. Camp Farwell in Newbury, Vermont, sends campers a preseason packing checklist that specifies "one stuffed animal (no live ones, please)."
- Write letters frequently. (The ones containing financial aid are usually the most gratefully received.)
- Don't overreact to first reports of homesickness. "Almost everyone experiences it at some point, but it almost always passes in twenty-four to forty-eight hours," says Johnson. Indeed, by the time a heartrending letter arrives in the mail, chances are the author is happily braiding friendship bracelets for her newfound pals.

Camp directors are so accustomed to seeing and treating homesickness that they may not even bring it to a parent's attention unless it shows no sign of abating. When homesickness does persist, however, it can be a sign that the camper is preoccupied with an unsettling issue on the homefront. "Most kids generally get absorbed in camp unless they are worried about what's happening in the family while they're away," says Johnson. If a family is grappling with divorce, a serious illness or death, it simply may not be the time for a child to be a long way from home.

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