

## **SOME GOOD QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT A SUMMER CAMP PROGRAM**

Once you have a good idea of what you and your child want from a summer camp, talk to other parents to get a feel for what's out there. Most camps have an active parents' group, but friends and neighbors are also valuable resources. List the camps you want to consider, send for literature or a camp video, attend open houses, arrange to speak with the director and take a tour of the camp.

- Ask questions of camp directors and staff. Don't just ask, "Is it a good camp?"
- Ask, "What are its strengths and weaknesses? "
- "What are the return rates for campers and for staff?" You want a stable community for the child, which is why the return rates are important. A 50-percent return rate is OK; anything over and above that is seen as better.

Consider asking the following:

- What is the background and experience of the director? This may indicate how smoothly the camp runs and how much communication there is between the camp and parents.
- What are the criteria for hiring staff and the ratio of staff to campers? The staff's average age, experiences and familiarity with the camp may affect your child's camping experience.
- What will it cost? What is the tuition? Are there other expenses? Is financial aid available? Will a trip outside the camp cost extra? Is there a refund policy? Can your child "try" the camp for a week or two, or do you have to sign up for the whole eight weeks?
- What is the condition and safety of camp facilities and equipment? Check that the site is free from hazards, such as unprotected cliffs, swamps and dangerous water areas. Is equipment in good condition? Is safety equipment required for activities, such as helmets for horseback riding?
- Waterfront areas should be roped off in separate sections for beginner, intermediate and advanced swimmers.
- Make sure children wear life preservers on boats and that flotation devices are Coast Guard-approved. The waterfront staff should be Red Cross-certified, water-safety instructors.
- Is medical care available? Is there an on-site nurse or doctor on call nearby? Where is the nearest hospital located? Does the staff know CPR and first aid?
- What is the philosophy of the camp? Every camp has a different view of the camping experience. The camp should have clear goals and a curriculum designed to meet those goals expressed in its literature and by its director.
- Are there a variety of activities planned? Ask for a copy of a typical schedule. What alternatives are planned for a rainy day?
- What is the age range of the campers, and is the camp co-ed? Will your child be the youngest or oldest camper in a group? If your child is going to camp with a friend, can he or she be in the same group or bunk?

- Is the camp equipped to deal with your child's special needs? Discuss your child's special needs with the director and ask him or her to inform the staff about particular requirements. Do counselors have expertise in special needs, such as a degree in special education?
- What is the pace of the day, and how is the program structured? Are there free periods if your child needs down time?

### Day Camp

- What are the camp hours? Many camps offer extended hours for working parents, both before and after camp. Inquire about activities during this time.
- Does the camp provide transportation? Ask about costs, whether vans or buses have seat belts and the experience of the drivers.
- Is lunch provided? If so, does it cost extra? Inform the camp about food allergies. If children must bring their own lunches, are they refrigerated until lunch time? Does the camp provide snacks?

### Overnight Camp

- What is the director's availability? Can your child go to the director if he or she has a problem?
- Find out if and when you can call the director to inquire about difficulties your child may be having or to find out how your child is doing.
- Are the living quarters comfortable and sanitary? Are there bathroom facilities and electricity in the bunk?
- Is there someone responsible for campers at all times? Make sure your child's whereabouts are monitored.
- Find out how counselors handle campers' problems, such as homesickness or disagreements with other campers.

## **HOW TO KNOW IF YOUR CHILD IS READY FOR CAMP**

Don't forget to factor in your child's stage of development when choosing a camp. Camps help children develop a sense of independence and new friends in a non-academic setting. Knowing that mom and dad are elsewhere can help a child feel independent, but not if the child isn't ready.

- The advantage of day camp is that children don't have to be up-rooted from their home, their room and their friends and parents. However, parents should still make sure the child is ready for a day program. Camp is the beginning of separation from the family, if the child is not emotionally or developmentally ready for it, it won't be a positive one, and the child will not grow from it. It gets back to knowing your child and his or her needs.

Most children have reservations about leaving home to attend overnight camp. Children may be ready for overnight camp if they:

- sleep over at friends' houses with no problems,
- make friends relatively easily in new situations,
- show interest in going to camp, or at least discuss it,
- express interest in a particular type of camp,
- enjoy going to day camp all day.

A child may feel at ease about going away to camp if a friend, older sibling or cousin attends the same camp.

Readiness may vary within the family. One child could be ready for camp at a certain age, while another might not feel comfortable at that same age.

### **ANSWERS TO PARENTS' QUESTIONS ABOUT OVERNIGHT CAMP**

If your child is going to overnight camp this summer, you may wonder how to handle certain situations that may arise. The American Camping Association, offers the following guidelines for parents:

- Should I call the camp to see how my child is?

You may want to call the director or your child's counselor if you have any real concerns or haven't heard from the child in awhile. Camps usually have a "telephone policy" and only allow parents to call at certain times, such as on a child's birthday or in an emergency.

Camps want to discourage a constant barrage of phone calls from parents, which can be very disruptive, for example, if a child gets a call when he or she is having a swim lesson. If a child is homesick, hearing from a parent can bring out those feelings. Parents should keep in mind that one of the reasons they're sending their child to camp is so the camper can gain a sense of independence.

- Will my child write or call home?

Most camps require that children write home regularly. Camps vary on how many times a week children have to write. They also limit campers' phone calls home, unless it is an emergency. If your camp has state-of-the-art technology, you and your child may be able to keep in touch by email or by fax.

- How often should I write to my child?

Write as often as possible. Send a letter a day or two before your child leaves for camp so that it will be there when he or she arrives. Pack a supply of stationery, stamps, pens and an address book; make communicating as easy as possible by including pre-addressed, stamped postcards. Send "care packages," if allowed, but check with the camp about whether you can include candy.

- What should I do if my child is homesick and wants to come home?

Don't overreact to one negative letter. Usually, something has taken place to upset the child, and by the time you call the situation may be remedied. By calling a child, you may resurrect the problem. Instead, speak to a counselor or the director. Find out how serious the problem is and what steps the director has taken to rectify the situation.

See whether there is a pattern or if it is a one-time occurrence. If the same problem occurs repeatedly or if the child is insisting on coming home, you may want to talk to the child or even take a trip to the camp and sit down with the director and the child.

- What can I do to prevent my child from getting homesick?

Packing a favorite comforter, stuffed animal or family pictures may help ease children's homesickness. Going away to camp with a friend may also be a comfort to a child. When writing to children, avoid dwelling on how much you miss them.

- Should my ex-spouse and I attend visiting day together or separately?

Parents who have divorced amicably may want to visit the camp together. If you feel the visit would upset the child or you don't want to be there when the other parent is at camp, you usually can call the director and arrange another visit. But it's important that at least one parent attends visiting day.

- Should I tip or give a gift to counselors on visiting day or at the end of camp?

Ask the camp director for guidelines. Some camps don't allow tipping. If tips are permissible, the amount of the tip usually depends on how long the camper has attended and whether the staff member is a counselor-in-training or a junior or senior counselor.

- How do I separate from my child without tears when visiting day ends?

Some camps have events planned right after visiting day so children are easily absorbed back into camp life. If not, prepare children by letting them know visiting day is about to end and by asking to play a game together before you leave. You may want to remind them that there is so much more to do at camp than at home and that many of their friends are away.

- Should I tell my child about what's going on at home - even if the news isn't good?

If there is a family problem or death in the family, call and inform the camp director. A parent may want to go to camp to talk to the child. Counselors and the director also can help your child deal with problems. A camp should be aware of any situation that adversely affects the child and has an impact on his or her behavior, even if it happened prior to camp, so that the staff can evaluate and handle the circumstance.