

# Checklist for Choosing a Summer Camp

BY ELLEN WARREN

**W**hen your child is ready for summer camp, where do you begin? With more than 12,000 camps in the U.S. alone, finding the right one can be as challenging as choosing a college. The good news is that with many excellent camps nationwide, there is truly a camp for every child.

## The Basics

"Start by defining your preferences," says Michael Chauveau, executive director of the American Camp Association (ACA) Keystone Section. "Involve children in the discussion and the process. Visit camp Web sites online, watch videos and review brochures together. Try to visit camps in session. Allow children to ask the camp director questions. Listen to your child's concerns. Choosing a camp together builds excitement and sends children positive messages."

Monica Kirchner is the School Age Child Care Director for the YWCA of Lancaster, which offers day camp programs throughout Lancaster County. Kirchner says, "Shop around and ask questions. Directors like to talk about their programs, and it shows us that you, as a parent, really care about where you're sending your child."

"Parents often worry about the cost of the program, but the most expensive summer camp programs aren't always the best quality," she adds. "Summer camps vary a lot from one program to another. Make sure the program you choose will meet the needs of your child and family."

## What kind of camp feels right for your family?

- Day or residential (overnight) camp? Children are often ready for overnight camp before parents are ready to "let go." When parents are supportive, most children are successful at camp.
- Coed, all-girls, all-boys or brother/sister camp? Both single-sex and coed camps offer social and developmental benefits in different ways.
- Traditional, specialty or special needs program? Ask about the camp's philosophy and program emphasis.
- Secular or faith-based camp? Faith-based camps may vary widely in their approach to religious programming; ask questions to find a good match for your family.
- Close to home, within driving distance or far away? Many camps provide bus service or will meet children at airports. Traveling may increase opportunities for special skills, adventure or multicultural experiences.
- Highly structured or free-choice program? Ask if campers do all activities with their bunk or choose electives for all or part of their day. Find out what a typical day and week are like: do children swim more than once each day? How often do they go on field trips?
- More or less rustic? Camps reconnect kids with the natural world, but some are more outdoors-oriented than others. Activities and adventure-level may vary with locale; living facilities at overnight camps can range from tents and shower houses to cabins with private bathrooms. Parents should care that a camp is safe and well-run, but campers care least about facilities.
- How long a stay? Sessions may range from one to 10 weeks. If your child will stay for a shorter session, consider a camp where all or a majority of campers arrive and depart for sessions together; it can be hard to leave new friends behind.



LANCASTER  
COUNTY

YWCA Camps, Lancaster  
and Millersville  
www.ywcalancaster.org  
717-393-1735, ext. 270  
Lancaster

ywca  
←

☑ How much does it cost? Fees range from free at some nonprofit camps to more than \$1,000 per week. Ask if meals or snacks and extra activities like field trips or horseback riding are included in the fee, and whether the camp offers financial aid or scholarships. Some camps will allow parents to barter services, like marketing or general contracting, in exchange for tuition. Other camps may offer flexible payment plans to help families fit camp into their budget.

### Finding camps

Once you know what kind of camp you're looking for, use a variety of resources to find camps that meet your needs:

- ☑ Check *Central Penn Parent's Camp Guide* and online Summer Camp Directory at [www.centralpennparent.com](http://www.centralpennparent.com) for regional camp listings.
- ☑ Use online search engines, like the ACA's Find-A-Camp at [www.campparents.com](http://www.campparents.com).
- ☑ Visit camp fairs in your area; find a camp fair calendar at [www.akeystone.org](http://www.akeystone.org) or check local resources.
- ☑ Ask family, friends, teachers, school counselors, clergy, community members and your regional ACA office for camp references. Teachers often spend summers working as camp staff, so they may have personal recommendations. Professional camp advisors can also be helpful, but know that they are typically compensated by camps for their referrals.

### Safety first

As you evaluate camps, safety should be your highest priority. Kirchner advises parents to ask about staff qualifications and trainings, the staff to child ratio, and whether the program is state-licensed or participates in Pennsylvania's Keystone Stars Child Care Quality Initiative. "Parents should feel comfortable with the camp administration, staff and environment and feel that their children will be safe," Kirchner says.

Chauveau says, "Ask if a camp is ACA-accredited.

Camps earn accreditation by meeting more than 300 standards for every aspect of operations — including safety, staff, sanitation, transportation, and more — and must submit to a review every three years. If a camp is not ACA-accredited, there may be a good reason. Ask whether oversight is provided by another organization, like a municipal government or an educational association."

"Parents should ask about the medical staff and how the camp handles discipline, homesickness and other

adjustment issues," says Chauveau. "Ask how meals are served, and whether the camp can accommodate special diets. Also ask if the camp sanitizes and promotes good habits to protect against H1N1. Finally, ask the director if you can speak with parents of campers the same age as your child."

While it's never too early to start considering camp, camps generally start enrolling in mid-winter and fill up in spring, though some camps may have openings throughout the summer. Kirchner says, "Most programs don't have field trips and swim schedules in place until February, so if you're interested in activities, it might be a good idea to wait until then, though it's good to get on camp mailing lists early to receive information. Registration typically starts in March or April, but directors appreciate parents registering early so we can better prepare for staffing, field trips and programs."

"At the end of the camp day, children should be happy, healthy and looking forward to the next day," says Kirchner. "A good quality program will provide a great

summer camp experience for any child."

Camp helps children grow in countless ways. Choose wisely, and the benefits will last a lifetime.

■ *Ellen Warren writes for the American Camp Association Keystone Section, which serves camps and camp families in Pennsylvania and Delaware.*



Photos by John Jascoll, YWCA of Lancaster