

Choosing Summer Camp for Kids with Disabilities

By Mary L. Waltari, Esq.

The summer camp experience can benefit a child with special needs and parents alike, but they're likely to feel anxious ahead of time. For kids, it's fear of the unfamiliar. For parents, it's worries about having someone who doesn't really know their child suddenly take charge. But if properly researched, spending time at a day or overnight camp can build a child's self-esteem, sense of independence and social skills. For parents, it can mean extra time to devote to a spouse, other children—or oneself.

Set Objectives

Talk to your child about how they'd like to spend the summer and the goals you feel are important. Is the purpose to build social skills, play sports, continue academics or *just have fun*?

Once you've identified your objectives, there are other choices to make. Day camp or residential? Programs that focus on special needs or an inclusive setting? Where are they likely to be happiest, most secure and able to take part in most activities? My son has a physical disability, so I've been very involved with adaptive sports, and in my experience, the more targeted the camp is, the better a child with special needs will be able to benefit from its activities.

On the other hand, there's much to be said for inclusive camps, where kids with and without disabilities have important opportunities to learn from one another. Siblings may wish to attend inclusive camps together or even attend as camp volunteers, providing both reassurance and chances for a child without disabilities to share their experiences with others growing up in similar situations.

Do Your Homework

Find out as much as you can about the camp by checking out its website, reading brochures or requesting a CD that shows its programs in action. Websites may include samples of daily schedules, menus and details about staff backgrounds. Ask about open houses and, if possible, visit before making a decision. Day camps sometimes run year-round, offering a chance to observe counselors interacting with the kids.

Ask as many questions as needed to feel comfortable, and pose them to counselors with "feet on the ground," not those in the front office. If you aren't getting the attention you need, move on, because if they don't have time for you now, they probably won't give your child the attention they deserve. And ask for references. There's nothing like comparing notes with another parent who shares your concerns.

What to Ask

Here are some basic questions to pose. You'll probably have plenty more:

- How long has the camp been operating?
- What's the counselor-to-camper ratio and what's the staff turnover rate? What training do counselors have and what background checks are made? Is it possible to arrange for a one-to-one buddy? For residential camps, what's the level of overnight supervision?
- What medical care is available? Can they maintain your child's therapeutic schedule and accommodate special diets?
- How structured is the daily schedule? Can campers choose which activities to participate in?
- How accessible are buildings, trails, pools and waterfront, transportation?

Communication

Once your child is at camp, you'll want regular reports on how things are going. There's normally a period of adjustment, but if your child is crying all night, how long will they wait to call you? Find out how they update parents and their philosophy about parents staying in touch with their kids. Are there visitation days?

Determine which staff member will be your key contact, probably an administrator or program director. You should also establish relationships with the counselors who'll be working most closely with your child. Be sure they know how to contact you, day and night.

Preparing Child and Staff

If this will be your child's first time at an overnight camp, arrange a sleepover with a friend or relative so they can get used to being away from home. When the time for camp arrives, pack photos or other reminders of the family to "keep home close." It may also help to alert counselors to comforting bedtime routines.

Educate staff about your child's personality and disability. You can print information off the Internet or get fact sheets from your doctor. Caring counselors are the best way to ensure that your loved one has a great summer, so let them know what works and doesn't.

Taking the time now will pay dividends. Your child will have a memorable summer and your understandable anxiety will be kept in check.