

Navigating the Camp Maze

Steering your child toward a great summer program

By Laura M. Miller

Whether your child is contemplating a move from day camp to sleep away camp, or is simply feeling ready for a change – selecting a camp or summer program is an important step. Together with your child, have a discussion about what he or she is hoping to get out of a summer experience. Does he want to improve his basketball game, learn ceramics, travel – or simply make new friends? As children mature, they can better verbalize to parents their wants and needs, and help a parent understand what they think will work in a summer program.

When Haley Rauch of Scarsdale, NY was 11, she began to feel as though she had outgrown the day camp she attended. “I had been there since I was five, but it was mostly sports and it was very outdoorsy,” said Haley. “I was also older than a lot of the other campers and knew it was time to move on.” Together with her mom and dad, Haley embarked on the process of finding a sleep away camp at which she could pursue her passions for dance, theater and horseback riding. Haley’s family spoke to friends about various camps, checked out some of the camp websites and ordered DVDs from the camps she was considering.

Seeing is Believing

While studying camp materials and watching DVD’s are great first steps, these are no substitution for actually visiting a camp. While any camp can produce a slick video to create excitement, seeing a camp first-hand is believing. If you are shrewd enough to be plan for this summer program switch a year in advance, you can do your “hands on” research during the summer months and see the camps you are considering in action. Weekdays are an ideal time to visit to gain a more accurate picture of how a camp typically functions. If you don’t get a chance to visit summer programs during the summer months, plan trips with your parents to see some camps and program locations in the fall and spring months.

All-Elective Camps

Haley and her family visited several camps last summer, and this year Haley started at French Woods Festival in Hancock, NY, an all-elective performing arts camp. Haley’s mom said that, while most of Haley’s friends attended traditional sleep away camps, she knew that Haley’s specific interests would not be served at these camps. “Haley is a creative, artistic child,” said Haley’s mom, Dr. Rauch. “There was no way she was going to spend her day on the soccer field. I wanted her to be at a camp where her unique interests would be celebrated.”

Isaac Baumfeld, director of French Woods, explains, “An individually programmed camp allows children to choose the activities they are most

interested in.” Baumfeld observes, “Campers are meeting other kids who share in their specific interests and this phenomenon cuts across age lines and bunk structure. One thing that stands out most in my mind is the tremendous amount of support these campers give to one another.”

Traditional Camps

Some families believe the bunk-centered approach of a traditional program offers a more valuable camping experience. Even most traditional camps *do* offer more choices for older kids, acknowledging their desire to steer their summer experiences. If you are considering a traditional camp for your child, find out what the camp does to help integrate first-timers into the camp environment. Are new campers mixed together in bunks with seasoned campers? Are there enough new campers in your child’s age group, so that he or she won’t feel like the only new kid? See if your child can meet another new camper in advance – so that they can both start the summer off with a friend.

Finding Good Advice

Another route to travel on your program search is to consult a camp referral service. These services are free to families and can help guide you toward appropriate programs, based on your child’s personality and interests -- and based on your budget. Arlene Streisand, Director of Camp Specialists in Jericho, NY suggests taking a look back, before taking a step forward. “What summer programs have children done in the past and what were their feelings about them?” says Streisand. “Which aspects of former camp experiences would you like to repeat and which aspects, given the chance, would you change?” Streisand also feels it is important to examine the programs your children are involved with during the school year. Are these activities they might want to explore more deeply during the summer?

It is also important to ask friends what their experiences have been at camp. If you don’t know anyone attending a particular camp, contact the director to obtain the name of a family in your area with whom you can speak. Find out what a typical day at camp is like, and determine what this person likes and does not like about the program. Find out about the other campers, to see if you feel your child will fit in.

The Internet

There is a huge amount of camp information available on the web. A new website called www.CampRatingz.com provides real opinions of camps and summer programs. CampRatingz.com allows users to rate camps on a variety of criteria and provides an area for specific comments. But remember, these are only individual opinions and cannot replace doing old-fashioned research. This site, along with several other online camp directories, has a search feature that can guide you toward camps in your geographic area or camps that provide the activities you desire. Then you can check out the various camp websites to see what interests you.

More Choices than Ever!

The best news is that there are now more choices than ...from teen tours and travel camps...to campus-based programs...to community service and leadership programs. The possibilities for your child are endless, with literally thousands of programs to choose from. These are all summer experiences that will expand your child's horizons, both academically and socially.

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