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## **Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Camp, but Were Afraid to Ask....**

Are you thinking about sending your children to camp? If so, you are probably concerned about five major factors – the quality of the counselors, the safety of the camp, the activities, the expense and, of course, the quality of the experience for your child. Fortunately, it's easy to get the information needed to make an informed decision. Here are some suggested areas to discuss with the camp director, courtesy of the American Camping Association (ACA), Northern California Section. The ACA is the only organization in the United States providing accreditation to all types of camps across the country.

### **Counselors**

Asking about counselors is a good place to start because warm, caring counselors are such an important part of the camp experience. Competent counselors serve as mentors and help motivate children to try new things. As positive adult role models, counselors serve a different purpose than school teachers or parents: children often see them as their first adult “friends.” To learn more about the counselors in a given camp, you might ask the camp director...

#### **How are your counselors selected?**

The ACA suggests the following procedure and criteria for counselor selection. Camp directors should get a written application from each counselor applicant. The directors should personally interview the candidates to get a better feel for their experience and skills. Additionally, the directors should thoroughly check the candidate's references to learn more about the person's character, maturity and job performance. Camp directors should go through these steps to help them choose people who are trustworthy, dependable and adaptable. They

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should look for people with positive outlooks and pleasant personalities who will be able to work – and play – effectively with the campers.

**What are their ages?**

The ACA recommends that at least 80 percent of the staff be 18 years of age and older. Any counselor younger than 18 years of age should be at least two years older than the campers.

**What kind of training do the counselors get?**

The better camps do in-service training. ACA-accredited camps, for example, provide 30 to 60 hours of staff training before camp and ongoing in-service training throughout the camp season. The counselors get training in counseling, leadership and safety procedures, as well as training in the particular skills they will be teaching. Additionally, the Northern California Chapter of the ACA has a weekend “camp school” and a one-day “Great Camp Kick-Off” educational event.

**What is the ratio of counselors to children?**

Generally, there are different ratios for varying ages. For day camps, ACA specifies a minimum of one counselor for every six campers four to five years of age, one counselor for every eight children ages six to eight, one counselor for every 10 campers ages nine to 14, and one counselor for every 12 campers ages 15 to 18.

For resident camps, the recommended ratio is one counselor for every five campers four to five years of age, one counselor for every six campers ages six to eight, one counselor for every eight campers ages nine to 14, and one counselor for every 10 campers ages 15 to 18. The suggested ratio is higher for campers with special physical, medical or behavioral needs.

**Is there a peer review program?**

Most camps have supervisors on site who oversee the counselors. Many camps have a formal evaluation at least once or twice a summer. This evaluation becomes part of the staff members’ permanent personnel file.

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### **Safety**

Obviously, you want your children to be safe. Just as obviously, there are no guarantees in life. However, good camps have established risk-management plans and enforce appropriate procedures and rules. A camp that manages risks well allows the children to enjoy themselves while they learn how to be safely out of doors. In checking about the camp's safety precautions and procedures, you might ask...

#### **If there is a waterfront area or pool, what precautions are taken to assure adequate and safe supervision of the campers?**

The camp must be structured so that children cannot go to the waterfront areas without proper supervision. At least one certified lifeguard must be on duty at the pool and at any waterfront area when children are present. Children must be required to wear life jackets at all times when boating, canoeing or participating in any water sports. When swimming, children should be required to know and follow the waterfront rules.

#### **What kind of medical treatment is available? How close is the nearest hospital or medical facility?**

Most resident camps have a nurse or a doctor on site. Day camps typically have someone trained in first aid and CPR on site. Additionally, day camps generally have some arrangement with local doctors' offices to handle any emergencies. All camps should have an established emergency procedure.

#### **What kind of emergency transportation is available?**

For a camp to be accredited by the ACA, it must have emergency transportation available at all times, either provided by the camp or by community emergency services. If the latter, the arrangements must be in writing.

### **Activities**

Camps today offer all types of activities, from the traditional to the specialized. After all, camp is meant to be fun and the activities are certainly a major factor in making camp a pleasant experience. Some questions you can ask...

**What kind of activities do you offer?**

Camp is active. In almost all camps, campers participate in a variety of organized activities, from hiking and swimming to crafts. Some camps specialize in particular skills, such as equestrian, theater or computers. If your child has a particular interest, be sure to check whether the camp offers activities in that area.

**Does your camp emphasize competitive or cooperative activities?**

This depends on the camp and its philosophy. Some actively promote competition, feeling that learning to be competitive at an early age teaches essential survival skills. Others favor cooperative learning, believing that non-competitive methods encourage young people to learn more and develop greater self-esteem. The choice is yours, and depends greatly on your child's personality and method of learning.

**What skills will my child learn?**

Camp is a place to learn – and enjoy – by doing. Children can learn many skills at camp, from rope climbing to ceramics. But studies suggest that children also learn much deeper things, developing an increased sense of responsibility, improved self-esteem, better decision-making skills and better interpersonal relationships. These kinds of life skills help equip children to become happy, successful, contributing adults.

**The Experience**

Obviously, the main purpose of the camp experience is to have fun. And, aside from the activities and counselors, the relationship with the other children is probably the single most important factor in determining how much your child enjoys camp. Here are some points to consider discussing with the director.

**My child is shy and doesn't know anyone. Will he or she have a good time?**

Obviously, no camp director can guarantee your child will enjoy him or herself. And most children are shy to some extent. However, at camp, everyone is free from the influence of their established environments. This gives children the opportunity to get to know kids outside

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their usual group. Actually, the camp experience might just be the thing to help a shy, introverted child deal more effectively with others, and come out of his or her “shell.”

**Can my child come with a friend?**

Sometimes coming with a friend or sibling can help a camper adjust. However, no friend can guarantee your child will have a good time. In fact, coming with a friend may be a detriment because it’s possible your child will not really get to know other campers.

It’s probably more important to find out how the camp helps newcomers become part of the “group.” Some camps, for example, do formal ice breakers, helping the campers get to know each other, work together and appreciate each other’s versatility and talents. If the camp does a good job, the children become better able to make new friends, definitely an important life skill.

**Does your camp have a diversity of economic levels, races, cultures? Do you have international campers?**

Answers to this question will probably vary, depending on factors such as the camp’s location and fees. However, it appears that many camps are becoming more and more aware of the value of diversity, and are actively trying to incorporate a diverse population to enhance the experience for everyone.

**My child has a special physical challenge. Can you accommodate him or her?**

Many camps can accommodate physically challenged children as well as children with other special needs. Additionally, several specialty camps enable children with AIDS, diabetes and other challenges to enjoy the camp experience. (See feature on special camps for special campers.)

**How do you handle homesickness?**

Homesickness is a very real and natural emotion that can occur when anyone leaves familiar surroundings. As a parent, you can help your child prevent homesickness (or at least reduce its impact) by preparing your child appropriately for the camp experience. For example, you can visit the camp with the child, send along a favorite stuffed animal, and mail letters to your children before camp begins so that they will be awaiting them on their arrival.

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Counselors can often help by discussing the feelings with the children, encouraging the campers to take it one day at a time, and getting the children involved in many fun activities. In most cases, this is all that's needed. Children typically overcome homesickness within a day or two. It would be unfortunate to have a child miss out on the whole camping experience because of an early bout of homesickness.

### **Fees**

Sometimes parents immediately assume that they can't afford summer camp. However, just as there is a camp for every child, there is a camp for every budget.

When considering costs, factor in what it would take to feed, house, supervise and entertain your children daily for one week. That amount may exceed the cost of some camps, even without taking into consideration the significant development benefits of the camping experience. Also, try to think beyond the bottom line to consider the value you are getting for the money. In many cases, a summer camp is a great bargain. Some areas to explore...

#### **What are the fees?**

The cost of the camp depends on the type of camp chosen and the length of stay. Expenses generally range from about \$200 to \$300 per week for resident camps operated by not-for-profit organizations. For day camps run by not-for-profits, cost range from \$100 to \$200 a week. Fees at independent, privately run camps are generally higher.

If your budget is tight, consider a shorter stay at a resident camp, a day camp or a camp operated by non-profit organization. If you choose carefully, your children can still reap the benefits of the camping experience without overextending your budget.

#### **Are there any additional costs?**

The general fee usually covers the majority of expenses. Sometimes special activities, such as horseback riding lessons or swimming instruction, are additional.

#### **Do you have campership programs? Financing options?**

Various agencies sponsor children who may be economically disadvantaged, culturally deprived or developmentally disabled. Financial help is also commonly available for families whose situations are not as extreme.

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Also, some camps allow families to pay a deposit upon registration and the rest of the fee in monthly installments. Some camps offer discounts to families with more than one child at camp. If you are interested, discuss any special financial arrangements early with the camp director.

### **American Camping Association**

Perhaps the most important question to ask any camp director is whether the camp is accredited by the American Camping Association. Such accreditation can eliminate many concerns because it verifies a camp complies with up to 300 nationally recognized standards. These health, safety and program-quality standards cover living areas, food service, emergency preparedness, program practices, health care, personnel, transportation and administrative procedures. While many good camps are not accredited, the ACA accreditation is tangible proof of a camp's ability to meet or exceed the standards in the industry.

For a free directory of Northern California summer camps accredited by the ACA, or to request a speaker to address your organization on summer camp, call 800-362-2236 or go online at <http://www.acanorcal.org>.

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Note to Editor: Other feature materials and photos/slides of summer camp activities are available upon request. Photos are also available online at [www.acacamps.org/media/pics](http://www.acacamps.org/media/pics).