

CAMP FOR A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS- MANY CHOICES AND OPTIONS

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Editor's Note:

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Getting away from daily responsibilities is important for both children and adults. Most kids look forward to summer vacation from September to June. During the school year, they are students from Monday to Friday, but when the last day of school for the year finally arrives, students instantly transform into kids — just kids — who want to have fun.

And what better way for your child to have fun than by attending one or more weeks of summer camp. There are a wide variety of summer camps regardless of a camper's abilities or disabilities. Most campers with special needs attend inclusive regular camp programs, but there are also camps available that are designed specifically for campers who have disabilities.

Whatever the type of camp you are looking for — inclusive or special needs, day or residential, week-long or summer-long — the key to finding a good match for your son or daughter with a disability is to get all of the information you need about the many choices and options available by asking questions, questions and more questions.

SPECIAL NEEDS CAMPS

There are many kinds of special needs summer programs. Specialized summer camps, such as an asthma camp or a camp for children diagnosed with cancer, accept only children with a specific disability. Cross-disability camps accept children with many types of disabilities, but often specify whether their program is most appropriate for children who have a mild, moderate or severe disability or disabilities. Both specialized and cross-disability camps are usually characterized by a high counselor/camper ratio and usually have a director and senior staff who have experience or a background in the specific population serviced by the camp.

In selecting a special needs camp designed exclusively for children with disabilities, you will find that they typically advertise an optimal level of safety for their campers. They have specific criteria for the kinds of children who are most likely to benefit from their programs. The background of many of the staff may be geared to experience with individuals with disabilities. Special needs camps often provide counselors and other staff members with pre-camp and in-service training and supervision. In addition to extensive information provided by parents, there may be some communication with the child's school or therapists who work with the child

(with written consent from parents). There is usually feedback to parents throughout the program and at its conclusion.

REGULAR "INCLUSIVE" CAMPS

Attending a camp where most of the campers are typically-abled can offer opportunities for some valuable experiences for a camper with special needs. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a civil rights law, which requires that camps, as a place of public accommodation, not discriminate between applicants based on presence or type of disability.

Additionally, they are required to modify physical facilities and program accessibility within certain guidelines. So, in a sense, all camps that are not specifically for youngsters with special needs could or should be inclusive.

Most regular camps gear their physical facilities, staffing, programming and activities to children who fall within the normal range in intellectual, physical, social and emotional development, but often staff can adapt different parts of the program to meet the needs of differently-abled campers. The success in including campers with special needs in a regular camp is in large part contingent on the philosophy, ability and motivation of the camp director and staff in accommodating the needs of all the children who participate in the program. By enjoying recreational experiences together, both children with and without disabilities can work through differences, and learn to help and value each other as uniquely-abled campers. However, keep in mind that regardless of the requirements of the ADA, if, in fact, the director feels the camp and your child are a mismatch, you may want to consider a camp where your child will receive the necessary program modifications and be welcomed as a valuable member of the camp family.

Campers Working Together and Having Fun

Most children with disabilities are much more like nondisabled children than different from them. Frequently, the main differences occur in academic areas such as reading, writing, spelling and math. Most of these skills are not essential at camp. Children who have difficulty in an academic setting can flourish at camp, where adult expectations are different than those in school.



The intelligence, fun and competence that is sometimes hidden in an academic setting can turn casual acquaintances into real friends who can gain an appreciation of individual differences and understand that everyone, regardless of ability or disability, has strengths and talents and can make a contribution to the group. And all of the campers can benefit when children with and without disabilities in their camp community succeed and have fun together.

Beyond talking to directors, asking questions, and keeping meticulous notes, one of the best ways to determine the quality and appropriateness of a summer program is to talk to other parents whose children have attended the camp in previous years. Ask the director for references, and follow up with phone calls. The more information you have, the more likely you are to find just the right match for a fun, successful summer camp experience for your very special son or daughter. ■

Along with the basics of location, cost, dates and times held, age requirements and whether the camp is a day or residential program, here are some important questions to keep in mind if you are looking for a special needs camp for your son or daughter.

Basic Information

- Is the camp accredited by the ACA (American Camping Association) and/or is it accredited or certified by other agencies?
- Is this a specialized or cross-disability camp?
- What is a typical day's program?
- What are the ages and range of abilities/disabilities of the campers?
- How many years has the camp been in operation as a special needs camp?
- Are camp scholarships available through the camp or a local disability organization?
- Are all areas that make up the facilities — play-ground, gym, fields, etc. — safe and totally accessible to your child?
- Is transportation with a lift available if necessary? What is the cost?
- Is there an open house to attend or a video of the camp available to borrow?
- Does the camp focus on one area such as language or reading remediation, motor skills development, therapeutic riding, adapted aquatics, etc.?
- If there is a wide range of developmental levels within a group, is there activity choice in a typical day's program?

Important Procedures

- Are parents asked for extensive information about their child's needs, and contacted if there is a concern?
- Are parents encouraged to discuss what works best in behavior and discipline for their child?
- Does the camp director request written permission for contact with the child's teachers or therapists before camp begins?
- How are needs such as medication or restriction of activities handled?
- What safety, medical and emergency procedures are in place?
- If a child needs adaptive equipment, such as positioning equipment, will it be available at the camp for your child's use during camp hours?
- What equipment/clothing/supplies must you provide?

Trained and Experienced Staff

- What is the ratio of campers with mild, moderate and severe disabilities to the junior and senior staff?
- What is the specialized background of the director, assistant director and program coordinator?
- What percentage of the staff are senior counselors who have

several years experience working in a special needs camp?

- What specialized training have the staff members had?
- What type of medical personnel are present or on call during camp hours?

For Programs with Aquatics

- Is the pool area safe and totally accessible, with a lift if necessary?
- Is the aquatics program recreational, instructional or therapeutic?
- Has the aquatics staff had specific training in adapted aquatics?

Residential Camps: Additional Questions

- How are campers grouped for sleeping?
- What is the ratio of campers to senior counselors in the cabin or dorm?
- Does the staff member who handles the cabin on the counselor's day off have other times to get to know the campers?
- How are diet restrictions handled and what is a typical menu?
- How does the staff deal with homesickness? Can the campers call home?
- Are visits and telephone calls from parents permitted?

Looking for an Inclusive Camp

If you are considering an inclusive regular camp for your child with disabilities, you may want to think about the above questions as well as:

- Would your child be safe and healthy in a regular camp?
- Does your child enjoy being with other children without disabilities?
- Has your child been integrated in school, play or other recreational settings?
- What areas other than academics does his/her disability affect?
- Can your child make his/her needs and wants known?
- Is your child's behavior, social, and motor skills strong enough to limit frustration? How does your son or daughter handle frustration/ failure/discipline?
- Does your child wander or even run away when he or she is out of your sight for even a single second?
- What do you want your son or daughter to get out of camp?
- Is the staff willing to accept help if needed to include your child in all activities?
- If your child is old enough to discuss the possibilities, does he/she have a strong preference for one type of camp over the other?

* In addition to these questions, you will want to ask other questions specific to your child's individual special needs.