

# MAKING THE MOST OF SUMMER CAMP

By Carrie Smoot

All kids, from age 7 to 16, and even some adults, enjoy summer camp: being outdoors under the stars, swimming, horseback riding, athletics, silliness and pranks, evening campfire songs and much more. "Camp gives children a chance to be independent, make friends with people from other backgrounds and cultures, and explore new skills," says Linda Pulliam, executive for the Virginia section of the American Camping Association (ACA) in Clarksville, Va. ACA is the professional association for the field of organized camping, and offers accreditation of camps. When is the right time to look for a camp? "The earlier the better," Pulliam says. "Winter is ideal, because they start filling up fast in the spring."

Pulliam says today's parents and kids often look for camps with specialized programs like art, drama or music—whatever matches children's interests. Nearly all families want the "great outdoors." Many parents in Virginia prefer sending their children to a camp within 100 to 150 miles from home. With school vacations becoming shorter, two-week camp sessions are the norm in Virginia and West Virginia.

## READY OR NOT?

What if your child with a disability wants to attend a regular camp? Pulliam says it's possible by arrangement with individual camp directors. "The Americans with Disabilities Act sensitized many camp directors, [and they are] including children with disabilities into mainstream programs," Pulliam says. "In the past, some directors were very intimidated, but now they see powerful benefits of bringing campers with and without disabilities together.

Staff members and counselors, who may be planning careers in special education, are well trained in working with campers with disabilities, including helping them overcome homesickness. And we've made the biggest strides in facilities management."

However, says Pulliam, parents may prefer to have their kids attend a special-needs camp, depending on how much help they need, the severity of the disability, and the expertise of the medical staff. "The staff of these camps try very hard to offer the same experiences that would be found at any camp," she says. "No one would perceive the kids' disabilities right away."

Before deciding where your child should go to camp, Pulliam advises to make sure your child is ready. "If your child asks about going to camp, has spent the night successfully at a friend's house, and is able to manage his/her medications and assistive devices alone or with supervision, they may be ready to try it." But she says it's open and honest communication with the camp director that makes a successful and fun experience. And you learn from experience each year. Families should visit a camp in the preseason to find out about the terrain, accessibility and other issues.

## THE RIGHT FIT

"Our philosophy is that everyone, regardless of disability, deserves the camping experience," says Deb Duerk of Camp Easter Seal West, ACA Virginia's special needs chairman. Parents often feel a little homesick for their kids, but nudging your kids a little to try camping is not a bad thing. And we offer extra care and supervision, with a staff-to-camper ratio of 1:2." She also points to Camp Easter Seal West's 95 percent return rate every summer. At

the request of parents and kids, camping seasons have become longer. Duerk also recommends the inclusive camping programs organized by the Girl Scouts of America.

In its 48-year history, Camp Easter Seal West has offered traditional camping experiences like swimming, canoeing and horseback riding. While Duerk says Camp Easter Seal East near Richmond, Va. is a little more self-contained, Camp Easter Seal West has paved walkways and follows ADA accessibility guidelines. The one-floor cabins have accessibility features and are all centered on a nature theme. "Make sure the camp is ACA-accredited. That's a clear indication that the camp takes its programs seriously," Duerk says. Parents should also ask a lot of questions about the medical staff and the counselors, the staff-to-camper ratio and the facilities. Also indicate in detail your child's mobility issues in conversations with the camp director and administrator."

"As parents research summer camp possibilities, if the camp allows it, it may be worth it to ask for the names of volunteer spokespeople or other parents whose kids have attended camp there in the past and ask them questions also, but just make sure you get honest viewpoints—not what the other person thinks you want to hear," Duerk says.

Robyn Feuerberg of Centreville, Va. is very supportive of Camp Easter Seal West, near Newcastle and Roanoke. The Feuerbergs have been so pleased with Easter Seals and its camping program that husband Stan has now become a board member of Easter Seals Virginia. Their daughter Amy, 14, has attended Camp Easter Seal every summer since she was 8 and loves it. Throughout the year, she keeps in touch with friends she

knows from there. Amy also has multiple disabilities, including severe dyspraxia, sensory integration issues, autistic-like behaviors and mild mental retardation. She uses a DynaMyte—a computerized programmable voice unit made by DynaVox Systems—to communicate.

Robyn Feuerberg originally heard about Camp Easter Seal West through another parent. "That's sometimes the best way to find out about resources," she says. "As well as providing a fabulous camping experience for our daughter, Camp Easter Seal does a great job of providing quality respite for the rest of our family. After we applied and Amy was accepted, I went through the usual motherly worrying about safety and whether she would be well taken care of. The director, nurses and counselors were wonderful and answered all of my questions and concerns about Amy's needs. In fact, one of the counselors we met lives locally. She is now a family friend who spends time with Amy once in a while."

But all did not run smoothly in the beginning. The first year Amy went to camp, she was homesick. The counselors comforted her and even allowed her to call home. As Amy became used to the people and activities, she felt better. Within a few days, she loved camp and had the time of her life. Camp quickly became an eagerly anticipated annual event for Amy. Knowing what to expect in later summers also helped. Her mom also came up with the idea of packing a family photograph using a talking picture frame. Mom, Dad and older sister Danielle each record a message, and Amy plays it whenever she feels lonely or just for fun.

## FINDING YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Robyn Feuerberg says it was a shock at first to see a whole camp of Amys, since they had always involved her in family, synagogue and community activities where she is often the only child with a disability. They have come to see that camp is a place where Amy can be herself, make friends, and participate in activities like baseball, fishing, swimming, arts and crafts, overnight

camping trips, special events such as a talent show, and more. The time away every summer, Robyn says, has helped Amy with independence and adolescent development. She also has speech therapy practice at camp, which continues work on her IEP goals and keeps her prepared for the following school year. Most definitely, her mom says, camp has been a positive growth experience for her, and it's something she looks forward to every year.

"We invite and encourage more families to take advantage of opportunities to visit camps when they are thinking of enrolling their children in a program," says Katrina Johnson, executive director of camping and therapeutic recreation, for The League for People with Disabilities, Inc. The summer campsite is Camp Greentop, a 67-year-old special needs camp with therapeutic recreation and camping programs for children and adults near Catoctin Mountain National Park, Maryland. The camp attracts families from Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C. for its traditional camping experiences, including swimming, horseback riding, nature walks and canoeing. Therapeutic recreation programs include accessible sailing in the Baltimore Harbor, assisted travel (past trips include Disney World, Myrtle Beach, and Las Vegas), and League Pioneers for youth and adults who want a primitive camping experience where they are supported to increase communication, leisure awareness and social skills. League Pioneers is designed for people who have cognitive or emotional disabilities.

"We have Visitor's Day April 25th. It is a great opportunity to see our facility, staff, and take part in many fun activities. We offer Family Adventure Weekend June 4-6," Johnson says. "Last year 12 families took part in the weekend, and the experience was great fun and a mini-vacation for everybody. More importantly, it helped the parents feel at ease. Parents knew their child would be in good hands the following year. And the new camper also knew what to expect."

Johnson says Camp Greentop is equipped to support children and

adults with high medical needs. A registered nurse is available 24 hours a day. The application process can seem time consuming at first. "The most important pieces of paper are the physical form and the medication sheet, which have to be filled out by the family doctor. Next, we want to know how we can best help campers with activities of daily living (ADLs), such as bathing, bathroom assistance, dressing and meals. We also assist where needed with equipment care and other issues. A detailed form allows campers and their family members to list the specific help they need. Since camp can be expensive for many families, financial aid forms are also available upon request."

Non-profit organizations concerned with various medical conditions also sponsor day and residential summer camps and teens. Michelle Knight, the American Diabetes Association's director of youth services in Alexandria, Va., says the association sponsors 54 camps for kids for kids with diabetes around the country through partnerships with other accredited campgrounds, and that sessions usually last about a week. "It's a traditional camping experience," Knight says. "A lot of parents—and kids—feel more comfortable with a diabetes camp because it's a safe environment with lots of support. The medical staff includes physicians, nurses and dietitians. All assist in managing blood sugar, meal planning and good nutrition. Some campers are proficient in diabetes management, while others need more support."

"For the kids, a diabetes camp is especially welcoming because everybody else has the same condition, and they don't have to explain why they have to check their blood sugar." Knight says most of the counselors either have diabetes themselves or family members have it, but all counselors have to undergo a comprehensive training session.

Families feel that camping is a worthwhile experience. "Generally, the parents are really involved in choosing a camp. It's sometimes very hard for them to let go," Knight says. ■

## Camp Choices and Options: Asking the Right Questions

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 — playground, 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 prior to camp?
- 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?

### Special Needs 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 day's menu?
- How does the staff deal with homesickness? Can the campers call home?
- Are visits and telephone calls to campers 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.