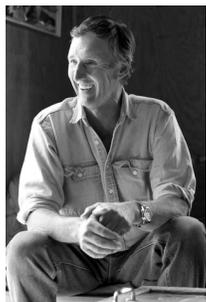


How to pick a summer camp

BY JIM WILTENS



DEER CROSSING



High Sierra Summer Camp
SINCE 1983

Every Spring, I see guidelines on how to pick a summer camp. As a camp director, I find that many of these suggestions are too general to be of value. When evaluating a camp, parents need to ask key questions. It doesn't have to be a long list. The responses you receive to a few thoughtful questions often point out a general trend. Here are some questions to ask yourself, as well as some probing questions to ask camp directors.

“What kind of camp will be best for my child?”

This first question is what parents must ask themselves. You can break this down into two general categories:

1. Day or Overnight (Resident) Camp. Deciding on a day or overnight camp requires parental evaluation. Younger campers (6–10) who have not been to stay with Grandma and Grandpa, have done little traveling, have had few sleep-overs, and appear overly anxious about living away from Mom and Dad may feel more comfortable with a day camp to start. Older children (11+), however, often relish the adventure of living away from home for a week or more at an overnight camp. Overnight camps require more maturity on the child's part.

2. Program and Activities (sports, farm, adventure, academic, weight loss, music, etc.). Involve your child in the decision-making process about camp activities. Helping choose a camp gives a child a sense of responsibility that ultimately contributes to their camp experience. You can make your camper feel involved by:

- Having him go over the choices for camps
- Letting him look through camp websites and call or write for brochures
- Having her present when you meet with the camp director or make a pre-camp visit
- Prior to her visit with the director, have her prepare a list of questions; such as “what kind of food do we eat?” This also helps you determine what is important to your child.

In the end, the final decision should be an agreement between parent and child.

“What should I ask the Camp Director?”

The director sets the tone of a camp. Like a conductor, she orchestrates the hiring of personalities compatible with the operation, oversees training, and enforces adherence to standards. Directors run the gamut from Aunt Marybelle and Uncle Richie types, using common sense and down home charm, to professionals versed in modern techniques of child psychology. There are also some crummy directors. Meeting with camp directors helps to determine if their values and ideas are compatible with yours; after all, you are the final judge.

Some key questions to ask are:

- “What is your **camp philosophy**?” Does the camp view itself as an elaborate baby-sitting service or does it have goals involving self-esteem enhancement, the learning of skills, or establishing better personal communication within a group? Follow up with questions into how the camp implements their philosophy and make sure you aren't hearing platitudes. If the director says, “We feel camp enhances self-esteem,” ask, “How? Give me a specific example of what your camp can do for my child in the area of self-esteem.”
- “Can you provide **references**?” Talk to parents, and if possible, to campers. If your child can talk with another child who has gone to camp, all the better.
- “What **hiring criteria** do you use for counselors and instructors?” Age is an important consideration. Responsible high-school students may be sufficient for working with youngsters in a playground setting where adults are readily available, such as a day camp. College-age counselors or above are appropriate for older campers and overnight camps. Ask, “Do you require your counselors to have current certifications in first aid and CPR?” Another good question is, “Do counselors attend a pre-camp training session?” If the answer is yes, ask, “What do they cover in this training?” (Some camps use “training” only to sweep cabins, paint fences, and set up camp.)

Originally published
in San Francisco
Chronicle
and Bay Area Parent
(revised)

Photo by Jaime Emery

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- “What is the **ratio of counselors to campers?**” Reasonable ratios are 1:6 for children 6–8 years old, while campers 15–18 years old can be adequately supervised by 1:8. Ask how many adults are on staff to oversee counselors. Water activities should have sufficient trained and certified lifeguard staff. While two trained lifeguards can easily handle a community pool with several hundred swimmers, a beach or lake front situation brings the ratio down markedly.
- “How can I be assured that a camp meets certain **safety guidelines?**” First, know that states set regulations for summer camps. The agency responsible for enforcing these regulations is often the local county health official, which may or may not have the time or resources to conduct regular inspections of camps in their area. Second, the American Camp Association, or ACA (www.acacamps.org), is a national organization that accredits day and overnight camps using rigorous standards that often exceed state requirements. Standards range from camper-counselor ratios and water front supervision, to vehicle maintenance and sanitation, from meal nutrition to medical screening. Accredited camps display the ACA seal. (Know, however, that a number of excellent camps are not accredited by the ACA.)
- “What is your **safety record?**” Even in a well-run camp with excellent procedures and supervision, accidents can happen. When you ask for specifics—such as “Tell me about procedures for a fire or water emergency”—the director should respond with organized procedures for handling emergencies, demonstrating awareness and forethought, a major part of safety.
- “How many windsurfers do you have?” “How many horses do you have and how much can my daughter or son ride every day?” “Is the lake on-site or a one-hour drive away?” Double-check the **availability of activities** shown in camp advertising. Some camps use

beautiful photos on their website or in their brochure of a popular activity. Yet children may be disappointed that they don't get to do that activity as much as they had expected. Specifying the equipment and resources available, then dividing by the number of campers at the facility, quickly narrows down what your child might really be able to do.

Summer camp is a marvelous opportunity, an experience that goes into a child's memory scrapbook. A good summer camp experience can have a positive shaping effect that lasts a lifetime. And it is up to parents to ask the right questions to make sure they get the best for their children.

Pointers for Parents Sending a Child to Summer Camp

1. Younger campers may be embarrassed about undressing in front of others. Remove this stress before camp by taking the child to community pools or gymnasiums where they change in the locker room. Children should also be comfortable taking showers, the primary means of bathing at most camps.
2. Prior to camp, avoid repeating how much you will miss your child. Also avoid talking about what you will be doing while they are gone.
3. If your child wears glasses, send two pairs to camp in case one gets lost or broken.
4. Pack plenty of waterproof sunscreen so you don't get back a summer camp lobster.
5. Make sure your camper has writing paper and stamped pre-addressed envelopes (unless email is available at camp).
6. Leave expensive cameras and other digital equipment, watches, and jewelry at home.
7. When you write to your camper, ask about her experience or comment on what she has already written you. Writing that Muffin, the family pet, really misses them only contributes to homesickness.

Jim Wiltens owns and directs Deer Crossing Camp, a wilderness adventure summer camp for children ages 8–17 in California's High Sierra. His workshops on proactive parenting skills for parents and on leadership and resiliency skills for children are offered throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. He is a three-time winner of the national Parenting Press Association

Award for best column on child development and parenting issues in a parenting publication, and the author of *Memory Smart!* and *Camels, Skulls, and Cobras*. For more information on Deer Crossing Camp, visit www.deercrossingcamp.com. For more information on Jim Wiltens, visit www.jimwiltens.com.