

## **Eenie, Meenie, Minie, Mo.....To Which Camp Should My Child Go?**

**by**  
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Ahh, summer camp. For kids, just the words conjure up visions of days by the lake, arts and crafts, sports, new friends, and a feeling of independence. For parents, camp represents a unique growing opportunity where children learn new skills, practice being away from home, have new types of social interaction, and let's be honest; it does offer a little vacation for parents, too!

Summer camp is a great way to help children develop independence and strengthen their ability to make new friends and adapt to new situations and environments. But in order for kids to have a great time and for you to feel confident that your children are well cared for and happy, you must first select the right camp. Choosing a camp can be a time consuming process, often leaving parents baffled by the sheer number of camps available. There are a few key areas on which you should focus to help narrow down your choices to the best possible option for your child.

### **Same-sex or Co-ed Camps**

Most children do best at a same sex camp because it takes the element of sexuality out of the experience. Even younger children worry about their appearance or looking silly in front of the opposite sex. At a same-sex camp, kids can enjoy the experience without those concerns. Many older campers, however, do need some interaction with the opposite sex so camps that have separate boys' and girls' facilities with supervised activities together is ideal. However, some kids can and do handle a co-ed camp quite well. You will have to determine for yourself if your child falls in that category.

### **Day Camp or Overnight Camp**

Some kids adapt quickly to being away from home, while for others it is a much more difficult transition. If your child has never been away from home it's a good idea to try day camps first and ease him into the experience. If possible, enroll your child in camp at a young age so he can begin experience the adventure of overnight camp as soon as and for as long as he can.

### **Special Interests**

There are camps that specialize in almost anything, from writing to drama to sports. Don't assume what type of camp your child wants to attend. Sit down and discuss his interests and goals together. If you want your child to attend a sports

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camp, but he is not that interested in sports, you're fighting a losing battle. Listen to your child and adhere to his wishes. The experience will be much better for everyone if you do.

## **Activities and Structure**

Unless your child truly needs an extremely structured program, look for a camp that offers some flexibility, but is still accountable for your child's exact whereabouts during the day. Older campers do best with more free time to spend "hanging out," while younger kids typically do better with organized activities throughout the day. Make sure to find out what process the camp uses to keep tabs on campers each day so they are always supervised no matter where they are.

## **Counselors and Staff**

### *Director's experience*

If possible, try to meet with the director or, at the very least, speak with him or her on the phone. Look for directors who have had at least four years of experience in that position at either the camp you are considering or another one.

### *Counselor to camper ratio*

Select a camp that does not have more than 10 campers per adult counselor, and less if possible.

### *Hiring criteria and training*

Find out how the camp recruits and screens counselors. Are the counselors recruited on college campuses? If you are considering a special interest camp like sports, for example, find out how much experience the counselors actually have in your child's sport of choice. How complete are the background checks the camp conducts on counselors? If your child has special needs or challenges, how experienced are the counselors in those areas?

### *Counselor turnover rate*

It's important to know how often the camp goes through counselors. If there is frequent turnover, either the camp does not treat its counselors well and they don't return or the camp does not screen counselors well enough and they subsequently break rules and are let go. While some turnover is natural, good camps typically retain loyal counselors year to year. This says a lot about the camp and the campers benefit from seeing familiar faces each summer.

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## **Other Campers**

Find out as much as you can about the other campers – where they are from, their interests, their religious affiliation (if this is important to you) and other general information. Ask what percentage of campers return each year. This will tell you a lot about the camp's quality. Try to get a feel for how your child might fit in. For example, if there are a large percentage of campers from a certain town who have gone to the camp for several years together, it might be hard for your child to “break in” to that group of friends. Ask the camp for references and call several of them. You will learn a lot about a camp from families that have experienced it first hand so utilize this opportunity.

Don't let the number of summer camp options overwhelm you. There are many terrific camps and the right one can offer unmatched experiences and memories that will stay with your child for a lifetime. So do your homework now – it will be well worth your efforts.

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