

Navigating the Camp Maze

Choosing a great summer program.



by Laura M. Miller

Whether you are contemplating a move from day camp to sleepaway camp, or are simply ready for a change, selecting a camp or summer program is an important step.

As you mature, you get to know yourself better. You are now at an age at which you can verbalize to your parents your wants and needs, and help them understand what you think will work versus what you think will not. With your family, decide what you hope to get out of your summer experience. Do you want to improve your basketball game, learn ceramics, travel—or simply make new friends?

When Haley Rauch of Scarsdale, N.Y., was 11, she began to feel as though she had outgrown the day camp she attended. “I had been there since I was 5, but it was mostly sports and it was very outdoorsy,” said Haley. “I was also older than a lot of the other campers and knew it was time to move on.” With her Mom and Dad, Haley embarked on the process of finding a sleepaway camp where she could pursue her passions for dance, theater and horseback riding. Haley’s family spoke to friends about various camps, checked out some of the camp Web sites and ordered DVDs from the camps that Haley was considering.

Seeing is Believing

While reading camp materials and watching DVDs are smart moves to make during the selection process, there is no substitution for actually visiting a camp. Any camp can produce a slick video to create excitement, but seeing a camp first-hand is believing. If you are shrewd enough to plan for the summer program switch a year in advance, you can do your

“hands-on” research during the summer months to see in action the camps you are considering. Weekdays are an ideal time to visit, to gain an accurate picture of how a camp typically functions. If you don’t get the chance to visit summer programs during the summer months, plan trips to see some camps and program places in the fall and winter months with your parents.

All-Elective Camps

Haley and her family visited several camps last summer, and this year Haley started at French Woods Festival in Hancock, N.Y., an all-elective performing arts camp. Haley’s Mom said that while most of Haley’s friends attended traditional sleepaway camps, she knew that Haley’s specific interests would not be served at these camps. “Haley is a creative, artistic child,” says Haley’s Mom, Dr. Rauch. “There was no way, she was going to spend her day on the soccer field. I wanted her to be at a camp where her unique interests would be celebrated.”

Isaac Baumfeld, director of French Woods, explains, “An individually programmed camp allows children to choose the activities they are most interested in.” Baumfeld observes, “Campers are meeting other kids who share in their specific interests and this phenomenon cuts across age lines and bunk structure. One thing that stands out most in my mind is the tremendous amount of support these campers give to one another.”



Traditional Camps

Some families believe the bunk-centered approach of a traditional program offers the most valuable camping experience. Besides, traditional camps typically offer vast choices for older kids, acknowledging teens' desires to tailor their summer experiences to suit their interests.

If you are considering a traditional camp, find out what the camp does to help integrate first-timers into the camp environment. Are new campers mixed together in bunks with seasoned campers? Are there enough new campers in your age group, so that you won't feel like "the new kid?" See if you can meet another new camper in advance—so that you can start the summer off with a friend.

Finding Good Advice

Another route to travel during your summer program search is to have your parents consult a camp referral service. These services are free to families and can help guide you toward appropriate programs, based on your personality and interests. Arlene Streisand, director of Camp Specialists in Jericho, N.Y., suggests taking a look back, before taking a step forward. "What summer programs have you done in the past and what were your feelings about them?" asks Streisand. "Which aspects of your former camp experiences would you like to repeat and which aspects—given the chance—would you change?" Streisand also feels it is important to examine the programs you are involved in during the school year. Are these activities you might want to explore more deeply during the summer?

It is also important to ask friends what their experiences have been at camp. If you don't know anyone attending a particular camp, have your parents phone the director to obtain the name of a child in your area who you can talk to about the camp in question. Find out what a typical day at camp is like, and determine what this person likes and does not like about the program. Ask about the other campers, to help figure out if you will fit in.



The Internet

There is a huge amount of camp information available on the Web. A new Web site called www.CampRatingz.com provides real opinions about camps and summer programs. This site was developed by the same people who brought you www.RateMyTeachers.com, which is already a popular Web site with middle and high school kids. CampRatingz.com allows users to rate camps on a variety of criteria and provides an area for specific comments. But remember, these are only individual opinions and cannot replace your research. This site, along with several other online camp directories, can guide you toward camps in your geographic area or camps that offer the activities you desire. Then you can check out the various camp Web sites to discover more about the camp or summer program.

More Choices than Ever!

The best news is that there are now more choices than ever for tweens and teens when it comes to keeping busy and engaged over the summer.

From teen tours and travel camps, to campus-based, community service and leadership programs, seemingly endless summer experiences are available to expand your horizons, both academically and socially. The sky is the limit when it comes to the possibilities open to you, with literally thousands of programs to choose from.

With the help of your parents and some good, old-fashioned research, you will find a program that works well for you. And you will soon be off making summer memories faster than you can say "School's out!"

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