

THE SUMMER CAMP SEARCH

Savvy Tips for a Successful Hunt

by Jar Lampard

Did you say SUMMER camp? You must be kidding, it's only December!

It may seem crazy to start planning for summer at the start of winter, but finding a camp for your child with AD/HD can be stressful for parents and children. While it is tempting to procrastinate, starting your search now will pay off in the long run.

Finding the right camp is like finding the right doctor or medication. It will take research and many discussions before you find a good fit for your child. To keep from getting overwhelmed, start early and consider the following:

- ▶ Many specialized camps fill their slots quickly. After seeing their children have positive experiences, relieved parents immediately sign up for the following summer, leaving few spots for latecomers. Waiting until February or March to sign up may be too late!
- ▶ If your child has severe symptoms, especially challenging behaviors, there are fewer camps that can really work with your child—and those will be in high demand.
- ▶ The early bird gets the scholarship worm. For many

families cost is an issue, and specialized camps can be expensive. Fortunately many camps offer financial assistance, but it goes quickly.

Beginning your search

Review your options before you think about enrolling your child in any camp. Camp is not just a choice between day or overnight any more. There are many more possibilities to consider, including adventure camps, science and church camps, camps through your local community or Parks and Recreation Department, camps that last for just a few days or all summer long, specialty camps that focus on academics, behavior or social skills, and camps designed specifically for kids with AD/HD or learning disabilities.

As you think about which environment might work best for your child, the following strategies will be useful.

Start by evaluating your child's strengths and weaknesses. Determine areas your child needs to work on (academics, behavior, social skills, etc.), select one or two areas, and focus on those. Then weigh her strengths and try to maintain a balance between work and play; this will help keep things both productive and positive.

While summer is a time to let loose, often kids with AD/HD still require some structure to their day. If your child does better in a structured environment, make sure the camps you are considering have a consistent daily schedule that is clearly communicated to the campers.

Is your child burned out academically? If so, selecting a camp that focuses on being outdoors or on a favorite activity, such as soccer or theater, might be a good option. For many children with AD/HD, self-esteem takes a hit during

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MORE INFO: Go to www.chadd.org/summercamp for updates on the 2008 CHADD/UCB Summer Camp Award. See also www.help4adhd.org/faq.



the school year: focusing on an area where your child excels can help rebuild self-confidence, while still improving an area of weakness such as social skills.

It is also very important to talk to your child. Get his input about how he would like to spend his summer and include him in the discussions. Being part of the process can help a child overcome any anxieties he might have and may lead to more positive feelings about camp.

Remember that you know your child better than anyone, so do your reading, get input from others and then trust your instincts.

Finding camps

Once you have talked to your child, considered her strengths and weaknesses and determined what you can afford, you are ready to look at specific camps. Here's how to find them.

- › Talk with other parents in the neighborhood, school, church, or your local CHADD group. Learning from others' experiences can save you time, money and grief.
- › Ask your child's doctor, therapist, school counselor, teacher, coach, scout leader, or religious leader for recommendations.
- › Search relevant Web sites to locate specialty camps.

- **The American Camping Association** (www.acacamps.org) allows you to search by specialty, such as "behavioral" or "gifted" and special needs such as AD/HD. Click on "Find a camp."

- **SchwabLearning** (www.schwablearning.org) only lists specialty camps and searches by location or keyword. Click on "Resources" then "Summer Camps." SchwabLearning has announced that its Web site will close at the end of 2007.

- **My Summer Camps** (www.mysummercamps.com) searches by category. Click on "Special Needs" and then "Learning Disabilities and AD/HD."

Now is also a good time to explore alternate funding to fill any gaps between cost and what you can afford. Talk to local businesses and service organizations such as the Elks, Lions, or Kiwanis Clubs to see if they can offer any assistance. Gather



information on scholarships like the CHADD/UCB Summer Camp Award, and apply early; many have application deadlines in early March. Another good early-bird strategy is to start setting money aside to help offset a large payment. Knowing and staying within your limit while shopping for a camp will help you all look forward to summer.

Selecting a camp

Once you have narrowed down your choices, call and ask A LOT of questions. Good camps are not only willing to answer questions, they welcome them. Some good questions are:

- How is staff selected and trained? Are the counselors high school kids or college students who are studying special education or psychology? What qualifications, experience, or certifications are required?
- What is the ratio of counselors to campers? How closely are children supervised?
- Does the camp have medical personnel to administer the child's medication, if needed?
- What behavior management techniques are used?
- What are the behavioral expectations for campers, and what

consequences may result from failure to meet them?

- Is the day structured? How is the schedule communicated to the kids?
- Are scholarships available, and how does one obtain them?

Also, make sure to ask about communication between camp and home. It is important for the camp to be a good fit for your child and your parenting style. For example: some camps encourage kids not to call home while working through homesickness or behaviors while other camps send daily emails with comments from staff.

Finally, ask if they have experience handling co-existing conditions or situations that are unique to your child.

After you have the answers to these questions, you are ready to make your decision. Then you can kick back and relax because you've got summer camp covered—and it's still winter. 🎧

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