Summer Camp

DECIDING ON A SUMMER CAMP FOR YOUR CHILD - AND Making It Work. By Stephen P. Hinshaw, Ph.D.

Although many school districts nationwide have opted for year-round schooling, a majority still hold to the traditional, nine month, September through June schedule. Filling in the summer months is challenging and potentially anxiety-producing for all families, particularly for those whose children have special needs, including AD/HD. The purpose of this article is to discuss issues related to (a) decisions about whether to pursue a summer camp, (b) the types of programs that may be optimal, and (c) the factors that can help make a camp program work for your child.

Residential and day summer camps have a long tradition in the U.S. For families of children with AD/HD, these programs may offer such benefits as child care during the summer months, a respite from the grind of schooling, opportunities for socialization and enrichment, and - depending on the type of child and program - the chance for intensive academic remediation and behavior change. Paramount for families will be hopes for enriching, successful experiences, and the development of new friendships, as well as fears regarding potential failure experiences or even whether their child will last through the program. Deciding whether to send a child with AD/HD to a summer camp and deciding which type of program to select are issues of great importance to parents, and are the focus of this article.

Family Questions and Anxieties

In considering summer programs, families may encounter a host of questions, issues, and concerns, which include (but are by no means limited to) the following: (1) **General "fit"**: Will my child fit in to this particular program? Are there any special accommodations for a child with attentional deficits? If the program is a general camp, do I inform the staff about my child's difficulties? (2) **Relationship to previous school year**: Will the gains that we have so painstakingly promoted from the past year be maintained over the summer? Or, alternatively, can a disastrous school year be transcended during the summer months? (3) **Overall purpose**: Should we view the summer period as a "break" for our child? A chance to develop hobbies or sports skills? Or, rather, is the summertime a unique opportunity for remediation of behavioral, social, and/or academic problems? (4) "**Making it"**: Will my child succeed find friends receive enrichment... develop better self-esteem? Or, will he experience even more failure or be asked to leave because of problem behavior? Addressing these questions can help a family to frame its expectations, goals, and fears.

Types of Programs

Resolution of these questions and issues will depend on family goals, the types of camps available in the region, and, often, available financial resources. I start by outlining some of the distinctions among camp programs in the hope of framing a family's decision points more clearly.

Day vs. overnight camps: Day camps include programs lasting several hours each morning or afternoon all the way to half-day or full-day sessions. The latter may also charge extra for "extended care" - that is, early morning and late afternoon hours to accommodate parental work schedules. Overnight camps, of course, involve sleeping over in a bunk, tent, or dorm room. By definition, these involve a separation from home and family.

General-purpose vs. "theme" camps: General camp programs, whether day or overnight, typically offer a range of indoor and outdoor recreational activities, with a focus on group participation. "Theme" camps may focus on a particular sport, event, or academic goal.

An increasing number of specialty camps that focus on children with special needs, such as those with behavioral, attentional, or learning problems are also available. These programs involve higher ratios of staff to children, more intensive training of staff, (often) requirements for parental involvement in programming, and, inevitably, higher cost. Along with their greater levels of structure and programming, they include (by definition) a high rate of children referred for problems in behavior or learning and, thus, are not "normalized" environments. A prototype of specialty camps for AD/HD is the Summer Treatment Program (STP) developed by William Pelham, initially at Florida State University, subsequently at the University of Pittsburgh, and now at the State University of New York at Buffalo (Pelham & Hoza, 1996). STPs have been established in several regions of the country. A good source of information about specialty camp programs in your area is your local CHADD chapter.

Issues Requiring Inquiry and Thought: General Questions for Any Program

What is the quality of the program as well as its reputation? What are the qualifications of the director and staff? The facility your child might attend will be responsible for her comfort, well-being, and safety for the entire time she attends; it is therefore essential that you become as certain about its quality and reputation as you can! Good programs will encourage questions rather than be put off by them, so ask. Among the things you can do are the following: Go to orientation nights. Meet the director. Ask about licensure or accreditation. Make sure to talk with families whose children have attended in past years (programs should have a "reference list" of past families available to you). Ask about qualifications of staff and training they receive. Inquire about security/ background checks performed regarding staff. Find out about staff-to-child ratios for various activities. Be sure to know if staff know first aid/CPR, particularly if the program is in a rural location. Ask to see samples of past summers' schedules or curricula. Inquire about field trips and any special procedures (insurance, seat belts for each child)

regarding transportation to these. Be clear regarding payment schedules, and ask about scholarships or "camperships" if needed.

For overnight/residential camps, the list expands to include questions about nursing facilities and hospital backup; food and dining standards; safety regarding swimming, horseback riding, and other sports; and supervision at nighttime. Because there are a number of areas about which you should inquire, it pays to be systematic at the outset.

General (Nonspecialty) Camps

For nonspecialized programs, or those for youngsters without particular academic or behavioral problems, you will need to get a strong sense of the camp's readiness to accommodate your child's AD/HD. At the outset, you will have a decision to make, based on your past experiences with your child during out-of-home placements and your own (as well as your child's) feelings: Do you tell the program about your child's AD/HD in the hopes of facilitating appropriate accommodations; or do you intentionally avoid noting this fact to eliminate any preconceptions staff may make about your child? This decision will be based on a host of factors, including your child's medication status for the summer (e.g., will program staff need to administer noon or afternoon doses?), your child's age and maturity, the amounts of problem behavior he is likely to display, and his own feelings about the issue.

If you do not inform the staff, getting all available information about the camp program, curriculum, staff, and director (see prior section) will be essential. The cost of such "normalization," however, may be less flexibility in the staff's willingness to accommodate your child if problems emerge. If you do inform the camp, you will need to take careful note of the program's experience in dealing with children diagnosed with AD/HD, its willingness to work with you and to learn, and its ability to handle medication and special programs.

In this case, among the specific questions to ask are the following: (1) Do the director and staff have outdated/stereotyped or up-to-date/ sensitive knowledge of AD/HD? How much are they willing to listen to your concerns and issues? Do they seem amenable to your input and suggestions? (2) Can the staff incorporate any special programs (i.e., daily report cards, staff monitoring of problems and progress) that might help your child during the summer? (3) If your child will be medicated and require dosing during the summer, is the camp equipped to administer the medication (or remind the child to do so) privately and without stigmatization? Get assurances about such accommodations before the program starts so that pre-planning can take place.

Specialty Programs

For programs specializing in children with attentional, learning, or behavioral problems, any and all of the above questions are fair game. In addition, you will want to find out, as early as possible, the following: Are all campers children with special needs, or do children without special needs also attend? What kinds of screening information (past

reports, current checklists, interviews, and/or testing) are required of you and your child prior to enrolling in the camp? If research is incorporated into the program, is the Informed Consent Form clear and understandable, and are knowledgeable staff available to discuss it with you? What kinds of reward programs and incentives will be in place during the program? What academic, social, and behavioral goals will be set, and how much will parent input (as well as data gathered before and at the start of camp) be incorporated into setting such goals? What academic materials and curricula are used to build academic skills? Are groups utilized to facilitate social skill and social performance? What kinds of prudent negative consequences (response cost, time out) are invoked with respect to problem behavior?

In addition, for specialty camps, it may be the case that acceptance is contingent on the family's involvement in such activities as detailed orientations, parent groups, and plans for maintenance of summer gains. There are also likely to be professionals (e.g., speech/language or reading specialists; psychologists; M.D.'s; and the like) either on the staff or serving as consultants; staff-to-camper ratios are likely to be smaller than in general programs. As a result, costs are bound to be greater than those for nonspecialty camps. You should inquire directly about the program's status as a provider of psychological, medical, day treatment, or residential services and about the potential for health insurance to cover some, most, or all of the expenses. As noted previously, Pelham's STP is a prototype for intensive, behaviorally-oriented, summer day camp programs for children with AD/HD and other behavior disorders. In this program. children participate for nine hours per day in an intensive schedule of classroom, sports, and group activities, with an optimal staff to camper ratio and a tightly constructed reward program in effect for nearly all periods. Other university-based programs, like my own summer day camps for children with and without AD/HD in Berkeley, California, are less explicitly therapeutic, focusing on social skills groups, science, art and drama, and team sports, in the context of a naturalistic research program (Hinshaw et al., 1997). During our current period of funding, we are focusing on girls with AD/HD.

Preparing Your Child

If possible, have your child visit the site of the camp before it starts. Alternatively, show her brochures and pictures or have her speak with children who have attended previously. Have open discussions with your child about your own goals for the summer, whether they be fun and relaxation or explicit academic and behavioral objectives.

Separating from your child on the first day of the program (especially for first-time overnight campers) can be difficult, bringing back memories of difficult separations at the beginning of preschool, kindergarten, or first grade; but remember that your ability to make the departure as smooth as possible will greatly help your child's adjustment. Balancing active interest in your child's activities while also leaving room for your child to explore new experiences without intrusion is ideal.

Building competencies and strengths in a child with attentional and behavioral problems is essential for future success. Summer camp programs may provide even greater opportunities for such development than can occur during the school year. Overall, get clarity on your goals for the summer; explore programs with as many active questions as you can; and prepare your child for what may be the type of experience that can optimally build her strengths. Remember, once the summer begins, fall will return all too quickly!

References

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Attention!® Magazine Volume 4, Number 4, Page 31