



Finding a Camp for Your Child With Special Needs

Ah, summer camp. The mosquitoes, the swim races, the friendships, the bug juice, the postcards home. What child wouldn't benefit from the fun and structured freedom camps provide? Kids with special needs certainly aren't an exception. But the prospect can seem daunting to parents and kids alike - how can you be sure that your child will get the attention he or she needs? Will your child be able to participate fully? What about the other kids? Will your child make friends? Will they understand your child's special needs?

The good news is that there are more camp choices now than at any other time for kids with special needs. From highly specialized camps to regular camps that accommodate kids with special needs, there are options for every child. With careful consideration of what will benefit your child most, along with thorough research, you should be able to find the right camp for your child.

What Are the Different Types of Camps?

When it comes to camps, children with special needs actually have as many choices as children who have no such needs. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires all camps to make reasonable accommodations (such as the installation of wheelchair-accessible ramps) so that children with special needs can attend. So, camps that had never had a child with special needs attend before may now be on your list of possibilities.

Inclusionary (or mainstream) camps do just what their name implies: They include children with special needs in their groups of children with regular needs. These camps may have started out serving only a general population of kids, but they've gradually changed as the needs of the families they serve have changed.

There are also camps designed just for kids with special needs, including kids who have learning or behavioral problems, kids with specific chronic illnesses, and kids with mental or physical impairments. Many of these camps accept children with a variety of needs, but some camps only accept kids with specific problems (such as camps for kids with diabetes, cancer, speech or hearing impairment, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, etc.).

Within all of these categories, you'll have even more choices to consider in terms of duration, philosophy, and cost. There are nonprofit and for-profit camps, religious camps, camps run by national organizations, private camps, day camps, camps that run weekend sessions, and sleepover camps that accept kids for the entire summer.

What Are the Benefits of Camp?

The benefits of camp for kids with special needs are often the same as they would be for any child:

- increased confidence and independence
- activity and exercise
- the opportunity to interact with other kids, develop friendships, and build relationships
- positive role modeling by adults
- a chance for parents to have a likely much-needed break

Special-needs camps also give children the opportunity to be around other kids who are like them - an opportunity they may not often have. Independence is another benefit that camp can provide. For example, an overnight mainstream camp can give a special-needs child the chance to be without parents, doctors, or physical therapists for a week. This allows children to do more things for themselves and learn how to ask friends to help.

Learning that their peers or other adults can help them is also valuable for kids with special needs. Children can learn to be assertive in problem-solving and communicating needs.

In addition, camp provides the physical benefits of increased activity as well. Many children with disabilities or chronic illnesses are sedentary and don't often participate in the sports or recreational activities that their peers do. They therefore miss out on the social and health benefits that exercise brings. Camp provides a variety of activities such as swimming, wheelchair racing, dancing, tennis, or golf. This gives children immediate health benefits in terms of improved cardiovascular fitness and also provides recreational options that will carry over into adult life.

In addition, many camps combine learning environments with these physical activities, giving children with behavioral or learning problems the chance to develop, or catch up on, needed skills during the summer.

Starting Your Camp Search

A good way to begin looking for a camp is to make several lists that establish the basics you're looking for: a list of goals, a list of caretaking priorities, and a list of other requirements (such as cost).

You'll also need to figure out which type of camp might best suit your child:

- inclusionary (or mainstream) camps
- camps for kids with a specific special need
- general special-needs camps

When trying to find the right type of camp for your child, consider whether your child has ever been away from home, for the weekend or even longer, and what experiences your child has had that might help prepare him or her for camp. This will help you to decide not only the type of camp, but whether your child is ready for a day camp or a sleepover (residential) camp.

Involving your child in the camp search will help to ensure that he or she gets the most out of the camp you select. So, it's a good idea to ask your child the following:

- What do you want to get out of summer camp?
- What are your preferences?
- Do you want to go to a coed camp, or just be around kids of the same gender?
- Are there any activities you really want to try?
- Would you be more comfortable going to a camp with kids who do or don't have special needs?
- Are you comfortable being away from home? If so, for how long?
- Do you have classmates or friends who have gone to a summer camp? If so, which ones? And did they like it?

If it turns out that the idea of camp is a bit overwhelming for both you and your child, you want might to try starting small, like weekend sessions at a special-needs camp.

Doing Your Research

Whatever type of camp you're leaning toward, it's important to do your research. And there are plenty of places to get information on camps these days. The American Camp Association (ACA), for example, has an online listing of special-needs camps that's broken down by the types of camps, cost, length of stay, state/region, and campers' ages. The site is also loaded with general as well as age-appropriate advice for parents of would-be campers.

You can also call local chapters of major disability organizations to find out what camps are available in your area. Many organizations publish lists of camps and can connect you with camp directors and former campers.

In addition, you might be able to find a special-needs camp fair in your area. Check the calendar listings in your local newspapers and monthly parenting magazines. Many of these are held in January or February, which means that you need to start your camp search early.

Of course, part of your research will involve figuring out what you can afford. The cost of camps varies widely, with some high-end special-needs camps costing thousands of dollars for multiple-week sessions.

Although you can help fund your child's camp experience by applying for scholarships, experts say you should make sure to do so from December through March, because the money is gone by April or May. You can contact charitable organizations and fraternal organizations (such as the Lions, Kiwanis, and Rotary Clubs, all of which sponsor special-needs camps). And depending on your child's specific special need, he or she may be eligible for financial aid from your state. Other sources of scholarships include religious or ethnic charities.

One thing to bear in mind, though: You usually **first** need to find a camp that's willing to take your child - most of these organizations send the scholarship money to the camp in the child's name, not to the parents directly.

Questions to Ask

So, how do you narrow down your choices and pick the camp that's right for your child? Some basic and special-needs-specific questions you'll need to have answered include:

- How long are the sessions?
- What's the cost? Are scholarships available?
- Is it coed, girls-only, or boys-only?
- What's the age range of campers?
- Where is it located - and how far away from your home is it?
- What's the staff-to-camper ratio?
- How old are most of the counselors?
- What type of certification do the counselors have?
- What's the turnover rate? Do kids and staff come back?
- What's the camp's philosophy? Does it fit with your goals for your child?
- What's the camp's transportation system like?
- If physical accessibility is an issue, what's the layout of the camp? What provisions has the camp made (or can it make) for wheelchairs or crutches?
- If your child needs a special diet, can the camp provide appropriate meals? If not, can you provide food for your child?
- Do staff members have a background working with kids with special needs?
- Do the counselors have first-aid training?
- What kind of medical staff is available in the infirmary and during what hours? Can the staff administer any medications your child needs?
- If your child has behavior problems, what's the training and experience of the available staff to help? And how does the camp staff handle behavioral problems?
- What's the procedure if your child develops a complication related to his or her medical problems? How far is the nearest hospital? If your child needs specialized treatment, is it available at that hospital?

Although you can get some of this information through phone calls, emails, brochures, and websites, experts recommend visiting the camp. You can talk to the director, visit the site, and get a comprehensive picture of where your child will be.

Probably the only way to get a true feel for the camp is for you and your child to visit it together. This is especially important if your child is going to a regular (inclusionary or mainstream) camp where they haven't dealt with many children with special needs, because it gives you the opportunity to point out changes they might need to make and to gauge the reaction of the camp's staff to your requests.

If you can't visit a camp, interview the director and some staff members to get a feel for the place. Ask them to describe the physical layout and the kinds of activities your child will do. You should also ask to speak with other families whose children have attended the camp to see what their experiences were like. In fact, word of mouth is one of the most effective ways to find out what you need to know about each camp.

As you're trying to figure out which camp is best, just remember that whatever the special need, there's likely a camp out there to suit your child. With some research and understanding between you, your child, and the camp director, your camper-to-be will likely be well on the way to having a summer he or she will probably never forget.

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