

## Summer camp planning

By Jane Whiting

There's no reason why you can't welcome thoughts of the sunny days of summer during the snowy days of winter. In fact, it's the perfect time to plan ahead for summer camps as the registration process is in high gear at many camps around the region.

If you haven't made any decisions yet, or you and your child are new "campers," it may be difficult to know where to begin! But don't worry because there is plenty of information in Capital Parent's Camp Guide to assist you in finding the right camp and prepare your child for a wonderful summer experience. To kick off, here is a winter planning checklist compiled with expert tips and advice from Canadian and American camping sources.

Your first question may even be: Is my child ready to go to camp? If so, the American Camp Association offers the following information to help parents determine the right time for day and overnight camps.

**What is your child's age?** Children under age seven may not adjust easily to being away from home. Consider the day camp experience to prepare them for future overnight camp.

**How did your child become interested in camp?** Does your child talk about camp and camp activities on a sustained basis? How much persuasion is necessary from you?

**Has your child had positive overnight experiences away from home visiting relatives or friends?** Were these separations easy or difficult?

**What does your child expect to do at camp?** Learning about the camp experience ahead of time allows you to create positive expectations.

**Are you able to share consistent and positive messages about camp?** Your confidence in a positive experience will be contagious.

After gauging your child's interest and reviewing camp expectations, it's time to seek recommendations from families, friends, neighbours and school or community contacts. Investigate all the camp programs you are interested in by

contacting them either by phone, online or in person, and obtain brochures and videos if available. While exploring different camp options think about the following considerations:

**Near or far?** Where do you want your child to go to camp – locally or far away? While each camp experience has something to offer, this is an opportunity to assess what you value for your child.

**Short or long session?** How long do you want your child to remain at camp?

**Girls only, boys only or co-ed?** Now may be the opportunity to explore this choice with your camper.

**Traditional, specialty, and special needs?** Understanding the camp focus and strengths may help you make your choice.

Once you have a shortlist of possible camps, compile a list of questions for the camp director. According to the Ontario Camping Association, most camp directors welcome the opportunity to explain their philosophies, policies and programs. The OCA lists ten top questions that should allow you to form reasonable expectations of the camp you choose:

**What is the camp's staff-to-camper ratio?** This indicates the overall level of supervision that the camp can provide. Also inquire about the number of campers under one counsellor's care, as this may be a different ratio. Counsellor/camper ratios should be no larger than 1:8 for children under 7, or 1:12 for children ages 8-16.

**What measures does the camp take to ensure the safety of the campers?** This addresses supervision and the quality of staff. You should learn about the ages and qualifications of the staff, the camp's protocols of supervision and risk-management (buddy systems, cabin checks), and the guidelines set for campers (boundaries, water safety).

**What is the camp's staff return rate?** A high staff return rate indicates good staff supervision, dedication to camp programs, and a high level of tradition. A happy staff makes for happy campers. High staff return may also point to sound training, including team building and professional development.

**What programs does the camp offer?** Are you looking for a traditional and varied camp program, or a camp where campers hone a particular set of skills/talents? Ask questions about the amount of time spent on each activity in order to determine whether it suits your camper.

**How do the campers choose their programs at camp?** Asking for a description of a “typical day at camp” will give you a good idea of the campers’ schedule, and will help you determine whether or not the campers’ time is being spent productively, actively, and enjoyably. This information also helps to prepare your child for his or her time at camp.

**What does the camp director/staff want the campers to take away with them at the end of their camping experience?** This will reveal the overall values and philosophies of the camp. The camp director should be able to talk freely and passionately about such things.

**How do the camp and staff deal with issues like homesickness, bullying, and campers with special needs?** Many camps have resources and policies in place concerning these issues. Staff should be trained in such areas as age-appropriate needs, behaviour management, methods of inclusion, and skill development.

**What is the camp director’s background and what are his or her qualifications?** His or her age, experience, education, character, and overall level of maturity will determine her or his ability to run the camp safely, smoothly, and interact appropriately with staff and campers. The camp director is the person ultimately responsible for the care of your camper.

**What kind of health care facility/staff is available to the campers?** Safety should be of the utmost importance at any camp and parents should be confident that the camp is equipped (on-site) or has a strategy in place to ensure quick and competent emergency response and everyday wellness.

**Does the camp have a system to transport campers to and from the camp?** If the camp offers transportation it should provide detailed information about pick-up and drop-off points, costs, and the quality and amount of supervision.

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