

The right camp at the right age

By Jane Whiting

When it comes to choosing a summer camp, it helps to understand the different types that are available and which ones are best suited to your child's interest and age. Looking at any camp guide listing, you'll find quite a range of options with everything from a traditional type camp experience to specialty camps; from a boys-only to an allgirl or coed environment; as well as half-day, full-day and residential camps!

It can be quite a challenge to decide which ones provides the right fit, so let's start with the strengths of various camp types. The American Camp Association (ACA) describes the benefits of traditional camps as offering campers a chance to try new activities as it provides a wider variety, which also brings them into contact with a larger group and range of campers and staff. A specialty camp often provides one or two specialized activities, which can be combined with traditional ones. There is usually an expectation of campers improving their knowledge and skill in a particular area of interest or ability, and increasing their proficiency during the camping session.

On the subject of single gender camps, the ACA points out a number of advantages that will appeal to campers and their families. A single sex camp can offer a liberating opportunity to break with gender stereotypes and allow more situations where girls and boys can be themselves without the pressure of impressing or competing with the opposite sex. For instance, it may provide an environment where girls get to experience more female authority and boys see males in more nurturing roles. In addition, the camp is also likely to be fully aware of gender strengths and weakness.

A coed camp is characterized by the ACA as a mirror of the real world, where campers participate in everyday activities with both males and females. A coed environment naturally offers diverse points of view and sensibilities, and, as camp programs are usually less structured and rigid than school, it can enable boys and girls to interact on a more equal basis.

Day camps are perfect for families on a tighter budget or those who are not comfortable with their young children being away from home, as well as for older kids who are not ready or suited to residential camps. Because they are usually nearby, days camps are also easier to visit and kids are likely to be familiar with

the location and have other school or neighbourhood friends attending. It's a great way to introduce kids to a new activity as most day camps are operated on a week-long session. Half-day or three-day camps are wonderful options for youngsters and first-timers.

To help parents choose the right type of camp for their child's age and maturity level and maximize their camp experience, the ACA provides guidelines on developmental milestones in childhood in relation to how they affects the selection process. For ages four to seven, the guide recommends one-day or mini-camps that specialize in pre-school and primary age activities with a good mix of athletic, artistic and intellectual interests. These should provide some structured summer fun in combination with regular family activities. Overnight camps should only be considered for toilet-trained children with good self-care skills who have had positive away-from-home experiences.

The guide also advises that all children should be involved in the camp selection process to some extent, with those in the eight- to-10-year age group having more say in terms of what kind of camp they like, how long to go and with whom etc. At this age, kids are more able to identify and make decisions on a camp that matches their interests and abilities, and some may want to consider a specialized camp program that works on their individual strengths.

Older kids over ten and teenagers need to be included in all camp decisions and assume responsibility for participating. By this age, the guide states that they are often concerned with fitting in and may have developed a sense of belonging to a defined social group that is identified with being smart, sporty or geeky, etc. Therefore, camps that cater to this specific age group are best and will typically focus on a particular area of interest, where they can build on their abilities and put a higher value on achieving certain goals.

With so much variety in summer camps today, there is sure to be one that fits the needs of your child and family. Take a good look at the Camp Guide in Capital Parent and remember to involve your camper in making plans to have the best summer camp experience.

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