



by Jessica Shea Choksey

Understanding the Pitch when Setting Up Camp

FOR MOST KIDS, going to camp provides images of fun-filled days, playing outdoors, learning neat things, and making new friends. However, for some children and parents, camp time is fueled by worry and uncertainty. This is an understandable and valid concern, especially for parents of children with AD/HD or other learning and behavioral disorders.

Just as there are specialty camps for students in band, sports and art, there are other camps designed specifically for children with special needs. The idea of a camp setting that is conducive to the way these children think and learn is very appealing for parents who wish to involve their children in a structured camp environment without putting them at risk.

Although every child eventually is confronted with a conflict involving another child, whether in camp, at school, on the playground or some other social setting, if a child is unable to properly cope with conflict, a myriad of problems can arise. It's unlikely that ordinary camps will have the experience or time to devote to individual children when such problems occur. However, at camps structured for children with AD/HD or other physical or mental disabilities, the staffs work to provide an atmosphere that is receptive, and counselors are adequately trained to understand and work with the children in order to provide them with the best possible camp experience.

It is important for parents to be aware that these types of camps do exist and to carefully research

them. There are several key components parents should look for in a specialized camp, as well as specific questions that should be directed to camp coordinators before registering their child.

Two very important and delicate matters that should be of the utmost concern for parents include the discipline process and procedures for distributing medication. These two issues alone are crucial when it comes to making sure a child receives the appropriate level of care he or she needs.

Once parents are comfortable with these procedures, they need to consider the philosophy of the camp, what types of programs are offered and how they can expect *their* child to benefit from the experience. For instance, Summit Camp in New York is a facility that serves boys and girls diagnosed with AD/HD and associated learning disabilities either with or without mild social or emotional problems.

Once parents have determined that a camp fits their child's needs, they should examine some of the other issues. Counselors should strive to assure the health, safety and happiness of each child, while



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meeting his or her basic need for acceptance, recognition and respect. Summit focuses on meeting these goals through a therapeutic recreation program. By combining recreational, social and educational activities, they are able to enforce feelings of success, confidence, enthusiasm and self-worth. However, these activities must be presented to each child in such a way that success is possible for children of all skill levels, and so that each child's individual interests are cultivated. A knowledgeable staff helps to provide guidance and maintain realistic expectations for each group of campers, while encouraging social development, improved living skills and new friendships.

It is important to keep in mind the reasons for seeking a specialized camp for your child, and why a "regular" camp atmosphere may not be suitable or beneficial. While each camp may cater to different types of children, the overall picture is to make a choice that gives your child the tools to succeed.

Asking the right questions and reviewing the responses is key. The following list of questions may be helpful when researching a camp for your child.

- What is the discipline process?
- How is medication handled?
- What are the safety standards at the facility?
- Is the camp ACA accredited?
- What are the camp's philosophy, staff qualifications and training?
- How does this camp for children with AD/HD and LD differ from regular camps?
- What are the age groups of children who attend the camp?
- Do many children return to the camp after their initial stay?
- How does this camp establish goals for each child, and how is their progress charted?
- What types of programs are available?
- Is there a theme or focus to this camp?
- What activities are available? (Indoor and outdoor)
- What are the accommodations?
- What incentives do the children receive, if any?
- Can the camp provide a list of references? (These should be parents whose children have previously attended the facility.)
- What should I do, as a parent, to prepare my child for attending this camp?

After reviewing the responses to these questions, make a list of any further concerns you or your child may have. You may also want to consider scheduling a visit to the camp so that you may get a better feel for the

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atmosphere and meet some of the staff members who will be responsible for your child's well being while at the facility.

It is also important that you get your child's input on what he or she wants out of the camp experience. Discuss the expectations and concerns both of you have before you do any further research or make any scheduled visits to the camps. The facility must offer activities that will be consistent with your child's interests. All children are different, and while some can't get enough of outdoor activities, others may be quite comfortable with adventures in learning—indoors.

The flexibility of the programs offered at Summit Camp provides a good example of the versatility parents may wish to consider. The camp is considered an "all weather camp," meaning in addition to the numerous outdoor recreation facilities available (tennis courts, softball, basketball, nature trails, hockey field, go-kart/rollerblade tracks, mountain biking, camping, climbing wall, soccer, etc.), they are also able to offer ample indoor space (recreation hall, arts center, a culinary arts program, fitness center, computer labs and a music room) to ensure ongoing programs regardless of weather conditions outside. This is especially important for very active children.

There are a lot of issues to address, but the process should not be difficult if you are dealing with a professional and organized camp. At Camp Buckskin in

Minnesota, the staff understands the variety of concerns that parents have when beginning the interview process. They believe that safety is the number one priority and encourage parents to question that aspect when considering any camp. Whether the safety concerns involve the accommodations, activities, the discipline policy or the distribution of medication, parents must feel a complete sense of trust when leaving their child with the camp's staff. Many camps offer these safety measures by having a health supervisor for medical needs, a discipline process comprised of natural and logical consequences, and a higher staff ratio for enhanced supervision. They also try to externally motivate each child to help produce the desired results.

The eleven-day program offered at Camp Buckskin combines workshops and role-playing exercises. It is their goal to create an environment where children with AD/HD or a learning disorder can experience success in a number of activities. Working closely with parents and schools, they are able to set goals for each child and follow-up with a progress report. Positive reinforcements help the children to build their self-esteem through daily activities and further

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acknowledgement. Awards are also given by the staff to encourage the children to keep striving and increasing their skill-levels.

There will be advantages and disadvantages to any given program or facility. The idea is to find the one that best meets your needs. Day camps are suitable for some children and parents, while overnight or away camps are preferred by others due to the fact that children may need the extended time away to gain some significant measure of success, self-confidence or acceptance. Some will cost more than others, some will have more bells and whistles, but don't be misled.

Making the decision to send your child to camp is nothing to be taken lightly. Ask the questions, review the responses, be open with your child and listen to his or her concerns. Make scheduled visits if possible, and compare different programs and camps. Above all—do your homework! After you have researched your options thoroughly, feel confident in making an educated, family choice based on what best suits your child's individual needs. ■

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