

No more pencils, no more books...

May 2010

It's time for summer camp!
By Brenda Lange

With the final bell in June, hordes of kids flee from the homework routine into the warm and empty days of summer. Maybe. It's much more likely these days that children exchange one routine for another, admittedly one they probably find more fun.

We're talking, of course, about summer camp!



For more than 100 years, American kids have been going to some form of summer camp. Today there are about 12,000 of them in the United States, and the varieties are nearly endless. Approximately 10 million children spend much of their summer vacation at one or more.

Parents can pay for their kids to get a general camp experience, complete with arts and crafts and marshmallow toasting, or they can send them off to learn about soccer, horseback riding, tennis, photography, golf, computers, art, dance, science, sewing, rock climbing, literature, languages or various other niche activities. Or they can find places that offer a little of everything.

Accreditation and trends

The American Camp Association (ACA) oversees many of these camps through a rigorous accreditation process, in which each camp must meet up to 300 health and safety standards.

“ACA accreditation is like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval,” says Michael Chauveau, the executive director of the group’s Keystone division. “The standards are high, and camps must renew their accreditation every three years.”

New trends come along every season. “Community service programs are being blended increasingly with traditional programs,” says Chauveau. “Eco-awareness programs like camp vegetable gardens and composting are also becoming more popular.”

Increasingly parents must make difficult choices for their children’s summer break. As everyone feels the strain of a struggling economy, both camps and parents have had to adapt.

“Rather than give up camp entirely, some parents send their children for shorter sessions, balancing their child’s diverse interests,” says Chevreau. “The important thing is that families who understand and appreciate the value of the camp experience are finding ways to ensure their children still get at least some time at a good summer camp.” Visit www.acacamps.org and www.campparents.org to learn more about choosing a camp and other valuable information.

Lisa Allyn Silverstein, director at Windmill Camp in Doylestown, (www.windmilldaycamp.com, 215-348-2660) agrees that the economy has made an impact, but that parents are finding ways to make it work. “They’re waiting—a little longer to enroll, to see how their jobs play out, for a tax refund or to see if they can get someone to help out a couple days a week,” she explains. “We’ll work with families who’ve been with us before. Camp is a different industry than some others, but many families do whatever they can to ensure their children get the experience, understanding the true value of camp.”

How to choose?

With more and more possibilities every summer, how does a family choose what’s right for their child?

For Cheryl Kaiser of Huntingdon Valley, the solution was simple. “We went out and saw the facility. It was very family-oriented and they treat their campers and their families like family.” Her 16-year-old daughter has gone to Willow Grove Day Camp (www.willowgrovedaycamp.com, 215-659-4393) in Hatboro for years, and will be a junior counselor this summer. Her 4-year old son is in the Willows group for the youngest campers, and can’t wait for camp to begin again.

She feels it’s worth it, and little touches like the door-to-door bus and healthful lunches and snacks help. “It’s like sending them on an all-inclusive vacation,” she says laughing. “It’s important to me that my kids have fun in the summer.”

For some parents, flexibility in scheduling, location, and payment options are the most important criteria. The YMCA programs in Bucks and Montgomery counties

offer plenty of all three. According to Trish Genghini, marketing director at the Central Bucks Family YMCA, (www.cbfymca.org, 215-348-8131) the Y's core character-building values—caring, honesty, respect and responsibility—along with specialties such as fishing, guitar and a skate park appeal to many parents and their kids. "And the fact that we offer financial assistance for those who need it, is something many parents find invaluable," she says.

Let the kids help

Once parents have defined their financial parameters, getting the children involved is critical. Visit the camp in person or through its web site. Read brochures, ask the child what they want to do. "Listen to your child's concerns and allow them to talk to the camp director," advises ACA's Chauveau. "Choosing a camp together builds excitement and sends children positive messages."

Parents should have plenty of questions as well. Will your child attend sleep-away or day camp? Does he need special meals or other arrangements? Can siblings attend together? And of course, what is the tuition and what does that include? Finding out about the staff, their credentials and how they're chosen for their jobs is critical. Camps may have the most beautiful facility and lack quality personnel. Of course, the opposite may be true. Performing due diligence just makes sense. Finding the right camp should be looked at as a long-term decision, since many children like to return annually, so the camp should be able to grow along with the child, offering different programs as the child's interests mature.

Growing together

One camp that offers long-term opportunities is Sesame Day Camp and Camp Rockwood in Blue Bell (www.srdaycamps.com, 610-275-2267). For 50 years, Sesame has provided a camp experience for children from 3 to 7. Then the child can graduate to Camp Rockwood where they go until they are 14. After that, they take part in Rockwood Adventures, the teen travel program, traveling during the week and spending weekends at home.

"Through our program, kids get consistency which is important," says owner/director Howard Batterman. "The younger children do arts, sports and outdoor adventures. Rockwood offers opportunities for kids to choose their own programs allowing them ownership of their experience; and we stress swimming and socialization for all our campers."

"The teens who travel go to watch whales near Boston, see Broadway shows, and travel on luxury buses with plenty of supervision. They not only get great experiences, they mature and learn to interact with each other and the general public," he says. "It's a lot of responsibility and they live up to it."

Variety is also the name of the game for the younger campers at ESF summer camps (www.esfcamps.com, 610-642-0246). The acronym stands for Education, Sports and

Fun, core principles the founders, brothers Michael and Bill Rouse, based their venture on when they opened their first camp in 1982.

“We help our campers build life skills, such as respect for others, leadership, creativity and making friends through the activities they participate in,” explains Greg Ackerman, the camps’ director of admissions.

Kids aged 4 through 8 learn to swim, practice different sports, take part in dramatic programs and learn about world cultures. From 7 to 14, they can opt for all sports or continue with variety. And from ages 9 through 15, they add something called “Life Adventures” to their programs. The senior campers learn about cooking, try rockwall climbing, broadcasting and something fun called Mythbusters, where they study different science hypotheses and determine whether they are real or myths.

Sports anyone?

Most traditional summer camp programs include some level of sports activities, but an inclusive, far-reaching sports camp program is run by the Somerville, NJ, based company, U.S. Sports Institute (www.ussportsinstitute.com, 908-534-5305). Multi-sports camps are held at many local locations, where campers can sample up to 15 different sports from around the world, including cricket, rugby, bocce, and something called Pilo (pronounced pillow) polo. Played with two teams, each player uses a short, plastic mallet with a rubber end to try to drive a large foam ball between two plastic cones on either side of the soccer field.

Camps dedicated to single sports are also offered at these sites, where the emphasis is on building coordination, good sportsmanship, character and having fun, starting with the Sports Squirts program for 3-year olds.

The arts

If your child starts off her day singing, continues by painting and drawing, and ends it putting on skits with her stuffed animals, perhaps a specialty arts camp is for her.

The James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown (www.michenerartmuseum.org, 215-340-9800) runs camps in drawing and painting, sculpture, fashion design, anime, folk arts and more for ages 3 through 18. Plus, children get daily exposure to the wonderful world of the art museum itself.

“Our teachers combine the fun of summer camp with learning new skills in a variety of art media, so the kids leave with great works of art they’ve created and good feelings about themselves and the museum,” says Ruth Anderson, assistant curator of education.

For children who love to sing and dance and move all day long, whether they have any dramatic training or not, the PA School of the Performing Arts Summer Workshops (www.pspadancer.com, 215-598-8513) might be just the ticket. Classes

in singing, acting, improvisation, musical theater, dance and acrobatics are held in one or two week programs, which end with performances for family and friends.

“For 14 years we’ve operated out of a large renovated barn in Newtown,” says director Terri Lee. “Our workshops are great for kids who have some training and want to continue growing or those who are testing out the waters by trying several programs.”

Whether your child is a budding Baryshnikov or wants to bend it like Beckham—from toddler to teen, computer geek to painter—there is a summer camp just right for him or her.

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