

5 Steps to Finding the Right Camp

By Tracy Levine

People often ask “what’s the BEST camp out there?” The key question is “what is the best camp for YOUR child?” Whether you’re seeking a day or overnight camp, these five steps will help you find the right match.

- 1 Take time to do research** — while ideal to start more than a year in advance, there are many ways to do thorough research for this summer. Identify what you hope for your child to achieve and what features may suit them best, for example: day or overnight camp; honing skills or exploring new interests; more vs. less structure; affiliation or religious component; camp location and geography of campers; size and cost, etc. Ensure the session options align with your anticipated plans for subsequent summers. Check for ACA (American Camp Association) accreditation, and understand why if a camp might not be accredited. Utilize online guides such as www.acacamps.org, www.mysummercamps.com, www.onehappycamperNJ.org, www.ccca.org and camp fairs to identify options. View camp websites and videos, request info packets, follow on Facebook and Twitter. Camp referral services can help connect families with potential camps; it is important, however, to understand their arrangements with recommended camps. Don’t choose a camp purely based on a friend attending — camp is a great opportunity to broaden horizons and meet new friends.
- 2 Involve your child** so they have a vested interest; otherwise, they may be resistant. There’s no “best age” to start — it depends on your child and the program. Many kids begin camp at older ages, including teens. Pre-screen camps based on your requirements, and then consider options together — browse websites, watch videos.
- 3 Talk with the director, staff, as well as other families.** The camp director plays the key role in the camp’s personality, philosophy, and how it’s run. They are accessible to meet or talk via phone — don’t hesitate to ask! If there’s been a recent leadership change, find out why. Talk with current families the camp can connect you — and remember: have parents talk with parents, and kids talk with kids — you’ll be surprised what they wonder about!
- 4 Visit camps whenever possible.** If you’re planning for the future, visit camps while in session for a true sense beyond a video or brochure. If you’re planning for this summer, consider an off-season home visit by the director, attend a “parlor meeting” hosted by a local family, and follow-up with a spring tour or open-house at camp. Call ahead to arrange your visit — and if you can’t make it to a camp-sponsored event, request another arrangement. Some camps offer a “taste of camp” option ranging from one night to two weeks, during or after the camp season or during the year. This can provide a low barrier way to try camp.
- 5 Evolve as you proceed through the process;** it’s a learning experience. Be open to evolving your priorities and criteria. As with most big decisions, you will likely make some compromises. Trust your gut feeling — if it feels right, and feels like “your camp” — then it probably is!

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