



Tips For Finding a Summer Spot in the Outdoors for Your Kid

By Justin Boles

When I was a kid, you went to camp where your parents wanted to send you, and their choices were somewhat limited. But these days, the camp consumer is much more discerning, and that shift has helped create many new breeds of camps.

There are so many different types of camp experiences, in fact, that selecting one can be a little overwhelming. What do you need to do to pick the right camp for your child so he or she doesn't end up singing, "Kumbackhere" after the first night?

Ask Your Child

First, involve your son or daughter. What you think your child will enjoy and benefit from is not necessarily what they would choose if given the opportunity. So, the oft-repeated advice is still wise: Bring your child into the camp selection process.

Some pertinent questions to discuss with your camper include: What do you hope to gain from going to camp? How rustic do you want your camp experience to be? What types of activities sound fun and interesting? Would you like to go with a church group? How long do you want to stay at camp?

Know Your Thoughts

As important as your child's expectations are, your feelings about the camp experience can of course not be overlooked.

Consider how far away you're comfortable with your child staying. Does your child have special needs with which the camp should be familiar? Do you prefer that your child be able to interact with the opposite gender at camp? What's your family's budget for camp?

And to what perspectives, doctrines, and values do you want your child exposed? Even camps that identify themselves as Christian can vary widely in their teachings and practices.

Begin the Hunt

Armed with information about your child's preferences and with a greater understanding of your own inclinations, start searching for camps that meet these criteria.

An excellent source to help you develop a list of candidates is Christian Camp and Conference Association's online search tool. www.findachristiancamp.com The site contains information about more than 800 Christian camps that are members of CCCA, which means these organizations have access to ongoing training and other resources that can help them serve children better.

Also, check with your church leaders to see if they have recommendations. They may already be planning to take the youth group to camp. Other parents can often provide camp references, as well.

Below are some other ways you can glean additional information to help narrow your options.

- **Look online:** Most camps today have websites, and you can usually find a wealth of information there. (Many camp websites are listed at www.ccca.org.) Pay attention to the overall feel of the site, in addition to viewing photos and reading descriptions.

What adjectives come to mind when you visit the site? Is it high-energy, modern, and youthful, or perhaps peaceful, inviting, woodsy, and warm? These impressions can be important. If the camp's leaders have put any thought into the site's design, the spirit of the camp should be evident. Be aware, however, that basing your decision solely on the website or lack thereof could cause you to miss out on a gem of a camp that just isn't very technically savvy.

- **Peruse the camp brochure:** The same principles apply to the camp brochure, but if it's a printed piece—as opposed to electronic media—camp leaders have much less marketing real estate to convey their message. In other words, what's included is what they think is essential for you to understand about their camp. What are they really trying to drive home in the brochure, and are these ideas and visuals appealing to you and your child?
- **Check staff credentials:** Many camps' websites provide a listing of and some biographical information about staff members, as well as a list of board members. The staff members' education, experience, and the like may be important factors as you consider the camp that would best serve your child.
- **Visit the camp:** Nothing will give you and your camper a better sense for a camp than seeing it. Be sure to call the camp beforehand so they can give you any necessary instructions or tips on maximizing your time at the camp.

During your visit, remember that the camp may not be having a session, or it may be hosting adult retreats. This may affect the atmosphere and even your perceptions of the camp, so be sure to ask questions to get the most accurate picture. For instance, ask to see the facilities where those activities that interest your child take place, and inquire about how the activities are supervised and by whom. Determine what the camp's philosophies are. Is there an emphasis on competition? Is the program highly structured or freer flowing with more choices? Also ask how close medical facilities are, and what security measures are in place to help ensure the safety of your child.

Finally, you'll certainly want to take a look at the sleeping quarters and dining facilities that your child would be using. Your camper will not likely require the comfort level you desire in accommodations or the class of food your palette prefers. However, you do want to make sure the facilities are clean, safe, and in good repair, and that your child would find adequate nutrition and pleasing meal choices.

Rate the Camps

After you've learned much more about each camp candidate on your short list, a fun way to engage your child in picking the one might be to create a simple chart with the names of the camps intersecting with categories such as activities, location, and price. Your child can assign a certain number of stars to camps for some categories and you can rate camps in other areas. This exercise can bring clarity to the tangle of information you collect.

Enjoy the Journey

The camp experience will leave a lasting impression on your child—and on you. Doing a little homework and including your camper in the process will go a long way toward making the time successful and the memories as wonderful as mine are.

Justin, who attended camp regularly as a kid, served at camps throughout college, and worked on two camp magazines, is the director of Brookhaven Retreat in Hawkins, Texas.

Previously published in Campsight