

Time to Start Thinking About Summer!

By Sue Lein, Owner/Director Camp Emerson

I know you're asking "Do I really have to think about summer in the middle of the winter?" Yes, if you haven't made plans already for your child, the longer you wait, the fewer options you'll have. So take advantage of the wealth of information on the web and relish the thought that you can send away for materials at 1am if you want!

Your time will be best spent if you target your search and have your questions ready. I'll help by giving you some important questions to ask potential camp directors and program leaders. But first, you'll need to spend time with your child really thinking about what's important this summer.

As a camp director and parent of gifted children, I understand there may be competing goals in picking a summer option. I'm going to make it even harder by asking you to pick just ONE. That is, what's the most important outcome my child can have from whatever we decide to do this summer?

Is it?

Intellectual stimulation
Making friends
Relaxing
Learning something new
Being a kid
Trying a wide variety of activities...
Balanced academic and recreational experience
Gaining independence
Family time
Building social skills
Or _____ (you complete)

As you think through this decision, check yourself. Are you choosing what you want in the name of what's best for your child or what will look good to others? Put your child first. There are only so many years to be a kid. We all know that gifted and talented kids have goals and pressures that most kids don't. Make sure your choice is what you both want.

Next, think realistically about the time your child would be comfortable being away from you. Residential programs run from 1 - 8 weeks. The majority are 2-4 weeks. Has your child ever been away before? What has his/her experience with sleepovers been like? Is he getting too old for day camp? Is it time for a residential experience or she'll never leave until college? (Note: This article leans toward selecting a residential program but most of the questions will work for day camp options too.)

Location, cost and dates are also important factors. Do you have any preferences or limitations?

Now go searching. The American Camp Association (www.acacamps.org) has a national database of camps, and of course Hoagies' [Summer Programs](#). It is easy to get overwhelmed.

Try to focus your search geographically, money, etc. There are also some excellent camp directories: www.mysummercamps.com is a great one.

Families also find out about programs by word of mouth, camp fairs and referral services. (FYI - There is no cost to you to use a service but know that the programs pay up to 15% of tuition per placement. So, if a service does not have a contract with a program, they will not recommend it. Referral services should work for both sides by learning about your child and matching your needs or they'll waste everyone's time.)

Getting overwhelmed? Step back. Try to narrow your search to about six programs and then read everything you can about each one; brochure, DVD, web, etc. There are many quality summer programs with excellent instruction and facilities. Which ones match your criteria? I love when I go to a home and the potential camper shows me a chart with each program analyzed by category! Involve your child in the process. His/her ownership for the decision is essential.

Now, get the list down to two or three and call the director...

Before you tell the director too much about your child, get him/her to talk. This way, you're hearing how they describe themselves and not necessarily how they've tailored their sales pitch to fit what you said you're looking for. You'll have your own questions I'm sure, but here are a few which will help you find a good match.

Philosophy and Directors' Background

Philosophy - Can he/she articulate what makes the program different from all others?

How many years experience as director? What makes him/her qualified? Is this full-time or a part-time position? Is he/she a parent?

How long has the program been in business? Camps will say that they started in 1928 but what they don't say is that there have been four different owners/directors in that time period. Find out when this director took over. Who owns the program? Is the owner: the director, a Board or off-site corporation? It makes a big difference.

Ask the director to describe the types of children at the program. Will the director know your child?

Program

What are the program's areas of strength? Most camps will provide a wide variety of activities and while general programs strive to do them all well, there are certainly those areas which stand out. Specialty programs are just that. Auxiliary activities may be offered but perhaps in limited time slots and with minimal resources.

Is anything required?

How are classes put together – Age? Skill level?

Is there flexibility for individuality? (This would be important to me as a parent of a G&T child. Not only to be taught at my level but to have influence over the program to make it special)

Are there any class restrictions based on age or gender?

Class size – instructor, camper ratio

Can you take a favorite activity more than once a day?

Will my child be forced to do something he/she doesn't want to?

How are schedules/class choices determined? Are children required to go to their classes?

Living Arrangements

Living arrangement - who lives with the children?

How are bunks put together? New with returners? Length of session? Age or grade?

If a dorm setup, how are the rooms organized. What adult supervision/interaction is there during free time?

Staff

What is the age of staff? How are they supervised? What teaching experience do they have? Are there CITs (counselors-in-training) or Junior Counselors? What background checks are done?

Policies and Safety

How do you deal with homesickness?

What is the telephone policy?

Will I hear from directors if there is a problem? (My personal pet peeve! - Ever found out the hard way that information about your child was being withheld? How will you feel if your child comes home after three weeks and says "I was miserable. I told them and nobody did anything!"?)

How far away is nearest physician/hospital? At what point are parents notified about illness/injury?

Is the camp accredited by the American Camping Association? This is a rigorous process evaluating every aspect from the kitchen to water safety.

Like what you hear??? It's Your Turn!

Tell the director your goals for your child. See how he/she responds.

Honestly describe your child including:

Personality – likes and dislikes

Previous camp experience

Types of children your son/daughter relates to best

Medical issues if any (withholding information can be cause for cancellation)

What makes your child thrive?

Any fears

Talk about your child's talents. Find out about the program's experience with G&T kids?

Get two or three references. Expect to hear good things from any reference. Try to dig deeper and find out what their child has gotten out of the experience and why they are returning.

A face-to-face with the director is great, if possible. This person will be responsible for your child. Your child should know who will be there for him/her and must feel comfortable with this person. If you're planning for next year or beyond, tour the program in action. Some places have "rookie days" where you can try it out for a day/weekend.

Got a decision? On information overload? Be wary of the hard sell ("We have only one space left!"). If you need a day or week, ask for it. More often than not, they'll say yes.

Last, there's the "X" factor, (your gut feel when you talk to the director and say to yourself, "This feels like a good fit" or your child says "I could see myself there.") Talk it over with your child. The right decision will feel good (and perhaps a little scary if this is his/her first time away).

Now, dream about summer and the great experience you've worked hard to plan for!

Sue Lein is Owner/Director of Camp Emerson a coed, residential camp in Massachusetts geared toward gifted and talented kids. She has been on the board of Connecticut Association for the Gifted and spoken at many Gifted Conferences. Check out Camp Emerson at www.campemerson.com, email: sue@campemerson.com or call 1-800-782-3395 for more information.