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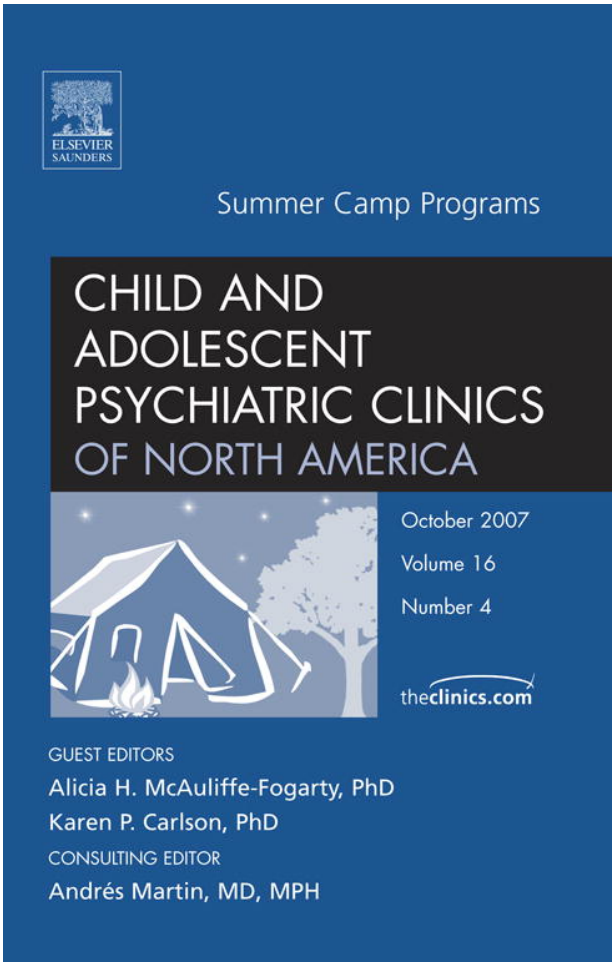

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Camp Selection and the Role of Health Care Providers

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Why camp?

There are numerous reasons why parents decide to provide a summer camp experience for their child. Many went to camp themselves and had a transformative experience, others fall in step with neighborhood convention, and a few are intrigued by magazine and newspaper advertisements. However, practically none know about recent empirical research that validates 150 years of conventional wisdom: Camps accelerate growth in key developmental outcomes, such as positive identity, social skills, physical skills, positive values, and spirituality [1] (see articles by Henderson and colleagues and Bialeschki and colleagues elsewhere in this issue, for a review of camp outcomes research). Enter the clinician, who can provide promotional materials and camp directories in his or her waiting room or who, during any office visit, can expound on the virtues of a week or more in the fresh air and sunshine. Perhaps most important, clinicians can address parents' primary camp concerns: (1) knowing when their child is ready for camp, (2) finding the best camp for their child, and (3) preventing homesickness. This article discusses readiness briefly and focuses on the clinician's supportive role in camp selection. (See article on homesickness prevention strategies for a review elsewhere in this issue.)

The best indication of camp readiness is a child's spontaneous expression of interest, perhaps sparked by a peer who is also interested in camp or who recently attended camp. Parents can also cultivate interest in camp by

Dr. Thurber is a paid consultant to the American Camp Association. He is also the volunteer chair of the ACA's Committee for the Advancement of Research and Evaluation.

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viewing Web sites and promotional DVDs with their children. Generally, children 4 and older are ready for day camps; children 8 and older are ready for overnight camps lasting a week or more. Of course, parents know their child best and often use the child's behavior during brief separations (eg, sleepovers, school field trips) as an indicator of readiness for summer camp. Health care providers can help parents place their child's separation behavior in a developmental context and determine whether excessive separation anxiety is present. In addition, clinicians can encourage families with camper-age children to visit a few local camps while they are in operation to get a feel for the richness of the experience.

For health care providers, one overlooked component of selecting a summer camp is to suggest some type of camp in the first place. For some families, especially in the northeast United States, the tradition of attending camp goes back generations. Parents in these families automatically consider sending their children to camp, often to the one they attended as a child. However, other families, especially those of minority ethnicity, may not have ever considered camp as a summer option. Familiarizing these families with camp has great potential benefits, including fun and growth for the children, respite for the parents, and an enhanced sense of belonging to a healthy community. Simply asking families, ''Have you thought about camp for this summer?'' can be helpful, as can directing them to user-friendly information. Two excellent resources, for health care providers and families alike, are the American Camp Association's (ACA) Web site (CampParents.org) and *The Summer Camp Handbook* [2], available through the ACA's bookstore.

Once parents feel a child is ready for camp—or once clinicians have judged a child to be ready and broached the topic of camp—the search for the ideal camp can begin. The selection of a summer camp that best matches a child's interests, abilities, and developmental level is essential. Without a good match, children may not fully realize the beneficial outcomes of the camp experience. Health care providers can assist families in their consideration of camp type, location, length of stay, gender composition, and structure. Of special importance is communicating any special health care needs to the camp's director, health care providers, and front-line staff.

The selection of type of camp (eg, day or resident, specialty or general, single sex or coed) will depend largely on parents' wishes and children's preferences. In all cases, health care providers should encourage parents to work collaboratively with their child in the search for a preferred camp. Research suggests that children who feel forced to go to camp, or who feel they did not get to take part in the decision-making process, are more likely to feel homesick once they get to camp [1,3,4]. Promoting positive adjustment begins with making children partners in camp selection.

There are unique ways that health care providers can assist families in their search for an appropriate summer camp. First, because they understand a child's health and any special needs, they can help families select a camp that best matches the child's interests, abilities, and developmental

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level. Second, because they have insight into family growth and dynamics, they can help parents and children choose among types of camps, such as day or resident, single-sex or coed, religiously affiliated or secular, to find the best fit. And third, because health care providers know the child's psychosocial history, they can assist in the promotion of adjustment and the prevention of homesickness before the child begins camp. Mental health professionals can collaborate with a child's pediatrician to ensure that a child's camp experience is both fun and enriching. The positive developmental outcomes of a day or resident camp experience are likely to be maximized when the structure and content of the camp complements the child's needs.

Types of camps

The broadest distinction among types of camp is between day and resident camps. Typically, children attend day camps from mid-morning until late afternoon, sleeping at home each night, whereas children at resident camps sleep at camp. Both types of camp can be as short as 5 days or as long as 8 weeks. Usually, camp sessions are offered during the summer, but with the advent of year-round schooling in some states, session offerings may span the entire calendar year. Generally, day camps serve children between 4 and 12; resident camps serve children between 8 and 15. Although day camps are sometimes seen as stepping stones to resident camps, that is not always the case. Both types of camps offer rich experiences that result in positive developmental outcomes [4].

Day and resident camps can be single sex or coed; they can be private or agency-affiliated (eg, YMCA or Girl Scouts); they can be for-profit or nonprofit; they can be traditional (offering a variety of activities) or specialty (offering a concentration in one activity); and they can be religiously affiliated or nonreligiously affiliated. Again, research suggests that all types of camps accelerate positive youth development in multiple areas. As one would expect, religiously affiliated camps are particularly effective at promoting children's spiritual growth [1].

Selecting a special needs camp

Any type of camp can serve a general population, a special needs population, or both. Special needs camps fall into three basic categories based on the needs of the child: physical, psychological, and weight loss. All three kinds strive to boost children's self-esteem and improve their coping skills by providing a safe, supportive environment where children with similar needs can share their experience and learn from staff and one another. Such camps also strive to teach children healthy habits. For example, children at a diabetes camp learn new ways of controlling their

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blood sugar through diet, exercise, and proper insulin dosing (see article by McAuliffe-Fogerty and colleagues elsewhere in this issue). The best part of any special needs camp is that children learn to do new things, including some things they never thought they could do. A supportive, beautiful camp environment is an ideal place for young people to push the limits of their abilities [5,6]. (See the Specialized Camping Programs section in this issue for more information.)

The physical and mental health care staff at any special needs camp should be qualified to care for the specific needs of the children they serve. For example, the nurse at a camp for children with asthma should have expertise using nebulizers. The doctor affiliated with a camp for diabetic children should be an endocrinologist. The nutritionist at a weight-loss camp should be qualified to work with children and teens. The psychologist or psychiatrist at a camp for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or severe behavior problems should have extensive experience managing children's emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Special needs camps should also be designed for the children they serve. Ramps and rails must be provided for those who use wheelchairs. Staff-to-camper ratios must be high to allow for the individual attention that some children with special needs require. Special medical equipment must be readily available. Above all, the staff should be highly trained in helping children manage their specific needs. It is inadequate for the staff to be a group of untrained people who are simply interested in helping children. Specialized leadership and health care training is necessary. Without it, staff at camps for kids with special needs may provide inadequate or inappropriate supervision. Health care providers can be particularly helpful to families by researching the professional qualifications of the staff at candidate camps. Although the ACA currently has no special accreditation process for special needs camps, their newly revised standards take children with special medical, physical, and psychological needs into account.

Weight-loss camps deserve special mention because millions of United States children are overweight, making weight-loss camps increasingly popular. These camps are designed to boost children's self-esteem and instill exercise and diet habits that they can bring home. Some children succeed at weight-loss camps and feel great about how their bodies change. Naturally, other children fail to meet or maintain their weight-loss goals. As with other kinds of specialty camps, families should research the philosophy and design of the camp and then decide whether it offers something new and potentially helpful for their child. Note that weight-loss camps, like certain weight-loss products, may make dramatic claims about how much a child can lose during a camp stay. As with other medical specialty camps, multi-week stays are more likely to promote positive behavioral change as children adapt healthy habits.

As an alternative to attending a special needs camp, families may wish to consider traditional camps that make accommodations for children with

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special needs. More and more traditional camps have "inclusion" programs and specially trained staff for this purpose. These camps provide wonderful experiences and may reduce the likelihood of derisive labeling because they are seen as "normal" camps with "normal" campers. Camps with inclusion programs typically determine a workable percentage of special needs campers who can be enrolled at one time, provide staff who have experience working with the special population, and design program activities that allow typical and atypical children to work and play together easily.

Many clinicians report that they can be most helpful to families of children with special needs by calling the directors of candidate camps, discussing the child's special needs, and helping to determine whether the facilities, health center, social milieu, and camp staff would be nurturing and challenging for the child.

Religion and spirituality

All camps exist along a spectrum of religiosity, from highly religious to nonreligious. To tell where a camp lies along this spectrum, examine what sort of organization, if any, sponsors the camp. If the sponsor is an orthodox, conservative, or evangelical organization, camp life undoubtedly has visible religious components. Such a camp might even advertise itself as a religious specialty camp. Children at such camps may feel like outsiders if they are not of the same faith as their cabin mates or unit peers.

It is also helpful to know, from the camp's Web site or promotional brochure, what proportion of the staff and campers identify themselves with a particular faith and how religion fits into the daily program of activities. Some camps have a religiously homogeneous staff and considerable worship and scripture study built into the daily program. Other camps, with diverse staffs and only a few important religious practices, are closer to the middle of the religiosity spectrum. If there is no mention of religion whatsoever, that camp is probably not religiously affiliated.

At first glance, it may seem as if many traditional camps are moderately or highly religious because they have important spiritual components to their program. These can include a secular or religious daily vespers service, some kind of weekend service, or mealtime prayers. At many traditional camps, these spiritual components are important parts of the camp's program and traditions, but they are not the focus of each camp day, nor are they the camp's major selling point. By contrast, highly religious camps clearly emphasize that a major part of each camp day includes divine worship and Bible, Torah, or Koran study.

In addition to formal worship and study, highly religious camps integrate religious themes into everyday games, songs, stories, and sports. The campers may be required to conform to certain diets, activities, and codes of dress and behavior. The staff is usually carefully selected according to their religious beliefs. Such camps give children an unparalleled opportunity

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to grow spiritually in the company of other children and adult role models who share their faith. Most highly religious camps are designed to serve children whose families are members of a particular religious group, or who are members of a specific church, synagogue, or mosque. With all due respect to an individual family's religious preferences, health care providers can remind families that organized religion is just one manifestation of spirituality. A camp can be spiritual, by promoting a sense of peace, friendship, community, and closeness to nature, without having any overtly religious elements.

Camp type pros and cons to review

Parents and children alike look to physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other health care providers for guidance on all matters, including selecting a summer camp. Reviewing the pros and cons below with families during a routine office visit will assist them in making an intelligent camp choice. Given the developmental import of a camp experience, it is incumbent on any health care provider to make sensible recommendations. Note that many camps begin registration in January and may be full by February or March. Therefore, the best time to begin the camp selection process is in October or November.

Pros and cons of day versus overnight camps

- Day camps permit children to see and spend time with their parents every day.
- Overnight camps nurture additional independence through a continuous experience of community living away from home.
- Day camps are local to a child's home, thus reducing travel costs. Day camps are generally less expensive than overnight camps.
- Overnight camps present more options in terms of structure, content, and location.

Pros and cons of traditional camps

Pros of traditional camps include:

- a tremendous variety of fun individual and group activities
- many chances to try new things, experiment, and be creative
- an emphasis on outdoor activities and living in harmony with nature
- traditional games, songs, stories, and ceremonies
- opportunities to build individual character as well as a strong sense of community
- cabin leaders who are usually trained in leadership skills

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Cons of traditional camps include:

- fewer opportunities to specialize in one particular activity (compared with a specialty camp)
- cabin leaders who may be "generalists," as opposed to being expert instructors in their field
- fewer accommodations for special needs (compared with a special needs camp)
- fewer chances to work on academic activities (compared with an academic camp)

Pros and cons of specialty camps

Pros of specialty camps include:

- opportunity for immersion in a favorite sport, art form, language, or academic subject
- opportunity to improve skill in a preferred specialty
- opportunity to earn a nationally recognized certification in a particular specialty, such as SCUBA, sailing, or computer programming
- opportunity to hang out with children who share common interests
- opportunity to work with instructors who are experts, perhaps even celebrities, in their specialty

Cons of specialty camps include:

- participation in mostly one activity for a week or more may get tiresome
- instruction in activities besides the specialty may not be excellent
- specialty camp locations, such as college campuses, may not offer the outdoor experience, close supervision, and quality leadership that traditional camps do
- celebrities at celebrity sports camps may not actually work at the camp each day
- expert instructors are not necessarily trained in leadership skills

Pros and cons of special needs camps

Pros of special needs camps include:

- the opportunity to improve coping with special physical, psychological, or weight-loss needs
- the chance to befriend and learn from children who face similar challenges
- the opportunity to feel supported and safe in an environment where all the other children face similar challenges
- the chance to meet staff who are experienced in helping children manage their special needs

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Cons of special needs camps include:

- staff may know a lot about the special need, or really want to help kids with special needs, but they may know little about leadership or instruction
- rented camp grounds may belong to an accredited camp, but the special needs camp may not be run according to recognized camping standards
- time spent exclusively with other children who have special needs may get tiresome, depressing, or even upsetting

Issues to consider regardless of camp type

Once the basic choices about type of camp have been made, the four factors of location, length of stay, gender composition, and structure are essential to discuss with families. Health care providers should be candid about which choices best match a child's interests, abilities, and developmental needs.

Location

The advantages of going to camp, particularly an overnight camp, close to home are:

- Families may have an easier time visiting the camp to evaluate it before enrollment.
- Families can find other families nearby whose children attended that camp and who can provide helpful first-hand information.
- Travel is less expensive than to a faraway camp.
- In-state tuition discount may be available if the camp is in a family's home state.
- Children may end up with cabin mates from their home town or school.
- Letters will take only a couple of days to get back and forth to camp.
- Parents will have an easier time getting to camp on visiting days and closing days.

Note that going to an overnight camp close to home does nothing to reduce the chance of strong homesick feelings [3]. Being geographically close to home does not make the adjustment to camp any easier or harder. It depends instead on the individual child's experience and attitude, the child's family situation, and the camp.

The advantages of going to a camp, particularly an overnight camp, far from home are:

- Families have more choices when choosing a camp.
- Many children, especially teens, enjoy making long trips on their own.
- A completely different environment could mean big mountains, a lake, snow, warm weather, the ocean, or even a country where English is not the primary language.

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- A greater chance that some of the other children at camp will be different, which adds rich diversity to the experience.
- Parents can join their children when camp is over, and add a family vacation to the summer plans.

Being close to home or far from home are not the only two options. Families can also choose a camp that is far from their home, but close to a relative's home. For some families, this option is the best of both worlds. They can have all the advantages of going to a faraway camp, but still have the security and convenience of a nearby camp.

In addition to distance from home and proximity to relatives, families should consider the unique advantages of certain geographical locations. Certain settings are better suited for certain activities than others. For example, if the child is interested primarily in snorkeling or SCUBA diving, families will want to look at camps on the west and southeast coasts. If the child is interested primarily in skiing or snowboarding, families will want to search for winter camps in the mountains. Although most campgrounds are varied enough to accommodate a wide range of activities, the choice of a geographic location should take into account the region's special features. Consider the climate, landscape, and bodies of water that the child needs to do the activities he or she likes, and help families factor that into their choice of a location. If finances permit, consider the unique geography of camps outside the United States.

Length of stay

Early in the selection process, there is no need to decide exactly how many days or weeks to spend at camp. However, families should both think about what range seems best. Shorter sessions (2 weeks or less) may be best for first-time campers. Much of your decision rests on the family's comfort level and finances. Health care providers can start the discussion by asking the child what length of stay he or she prefers. To help find the answer, compare the choices to other events that have lasted for the same amount of time. For example, ask, *"How does a 2-week session sound? That's how long winter vacation lasted. Does that seem like too long or too short for camp?"* Most children need these concrete references to get a feel for how long a certain time period is.

The longer the length of stay, the more important it becomes to select a camp that has a well-rounded program. If the camp repeats the same program week after week, or is a specialty camp with a narrow range of activities, long stays may become boring. Years ago, almost every traditional overnight camp lasted the whole summer. One advantage to a long length of stay at a well-designed camp is that campers can achieve tremendous skill levels in whatever activities they choose.

Remind families that consecutive short stays at different camps can get complicated. For example, it is usually easier for families to work out one

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3-week stay at a camp than it is to work out three consecutive 1-week stays at three different camps. If a child is excited about spending 3 weeks away from home, coach families to try to find one camp that offers a 3-week session. There are several *dis*advantages to attending a bunch of short-stay camps:

- Staying at multiple camps is usually more expensive, in both tuition and travel, than a single camp stay of the same total length.
- Unpacking and repacking between each camp gets tedious.
- Adjusting to a new group of friends is not easy, especially when children have to do it three or four times in a row in three or four different environments.
- Making an emotional commitment to one camp can be hard for children to make when they know they will be leaving soon for another camp.

Some parents and children do schedule two or three different camps each summer, especially if one of the camps is a specialty camp. This is a great option for some children, and many families manage to work out the details successfully. Advise families to think carefully before scheduling several camps back-to-back lest their schedule becomes too cramped.

Gender composition

Both single-sex and coed camps have unique advantages. Campers at single-sex camps tout the power and pleasure of bonding with same-sex peers. Campers at coed camps enjoy that the social pressures they feel at school often dissolve, giving way to healthy friendships devoid of romantic emphasis or sex-role stereotyping. In addition to considering the advantages of both types of camping, health care providers and parents should ask children what their preference is. New campers tend to have strong opinions on this matter.

Whether families choose a single-sex or coed camp, it is best to select one where staff keep the children as their number-one priority and where the adult role models demonstrate healthy friendships and appropriate intimacy. Male and female staff alike can help children escape unhealthy cultural stereotypes of what is masculine and what is feminine. With authentic role models in place, girls' inner voices stay strong and alive, and boys are not pressured to disconnect from relationships.

One of the unique advantages of a single-sex environment is that there are few romantic distractions. Some campers say they enjoy the chance to "be themselves," meaning they feel less pressure to show off or spend time making themselves attractive to the opposite sex. Of course, at a well-run coed camp, such behaviors usually disappear after the first few days. Campers quickly begin to focus on other interests and activities.

Another advantage of a single-sex environment is that the staff are almost all the same sex as the campers. This provides many opportunities for young

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people to see themselves in positions of leadership, power, and nonromantic friendship. Some would argue that a single-sex environment gives boys the best chance to see men in nurturing roles and gives girls the best chance to see women in positions of authority.

One of the advantages of a well-run coed camp is that boys and girls can come together on neutral ground where the labels, expectations, and rigid social order of school are left behind. As one camp director pointed out, "We live in a coed world. A good coed camp creates a single community of mutual respect, where a diverse group of boys and girls, from varied ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds come together as one." Perhaps the elimination of sex-role stereotyping is even more potent when done in a coed setting. Males no longer see females as weak sex objects and females no longer see males as emotionless brutes. Indeed, coed camps offer boys and girls the chance to interact and prepare for our coed world.

Coed camps also have an advantage for families with both a boy and a girl who want to go to camp. It is convenient for families to drop their son and daughter off at the same camp. Siblings may even enjoy spending time together at camp. However, the convenience of a single drop-off site is nominal if the advantages of a single-sex camp are important to families. As an alternative to searching for a coed camp, families should find out whether the single-sex camps they like have a nearby "brother camp" or "sister camp." Many camps have this kind of formal affiliation with each other. Usually, brother and sister camps are of similar quality and have similar philosophies. They may even have the same change days and visiting days, to make it easy for parents. Most brother-sister camps are within an hour's drive of each other.

Coed camps vary in how much they integrate the boys and the girls. At some coed camps, boys and girls may sleep and change in separate cabins, but do everything else together. At other coed camps, boys and girls are kept apart, but eat together in the same dining hall. Some camps promote themselves as single-sex camps, but they have a sister camp or a brother camp on the same property. It is important to find out how boys and girls are integrated in these settings because it affects how activities are run, how athletic competitions are organized, and how social time is structured. About 50% of all overnight camps and 97% of all day camps are coed.

Structure

Families should also consider the pros and cons of activity structure. Whereas some camps plan just about all program activities for children, others offer children choices; a few camps actually partner with campers to design and run their own activities. Health care providers can assist families by reviewing these pros and cons. The advantages to a highly structured program are that children get to:

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- Try new activities they might not have chosen on their own
- Know what is coming up next
- Rely on staff to schedule full and interesting days for them
- Improve at activities they plan to repeat each day

There are also disadvantages of such high structure. Children may:

- Be scheduled to do less enjoyable activities
- Not get to do their favorite activities as often as they wish
- Do everything with the same group of kids all day
- Miss the fun of choosing a personalized schedule
- Not have enough time to relax and just hang out

The advantages of great freedom in the camp's program of activities include that children get to:

- Have fun choosing what they want to do, and when they want to do it
- Plan to do some of their favorite activities every day
- Be with different groups of kids and staff at different activities
- Build in enough time to relax and just hang out.

The disadvantages of such freedom are that children may:

- Never try anything new because no one makes them
- Feel lazy and not go to any activities
- Get overwhelmed by the number of choices
- Fail to improve at any one thing because they're always trying something new

Clearly, the knowledge that the health care provider has about an individual child and his or her family can be extremely helpful when selecting the camp that best matches the child's interests, abilities, and developmental level.

Gathering information

Once a family has discussed the pros and cons with their health care provider, they should work on gathering information from a dozen or so camps that meet their criteria for type, location, length of stay, gender composition, and structure. The four main ways to gather this information are through friends, the Internet, the ACA, and private referral agencies.

Friends can be reliable sources of information, particularly when a child in the family has first-hand experience at a particular camp. It is wise for parents to arrange play dates with veteran campers and their parents, thus allowing the adults and children to discuss camp, each in their own way. New campers and their parents can always call or e-mail a prospective camp and ask for the names and numbers of local families with whom they can speak about the camp.

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The Internet is another great source of information about camps, although parents would be wise to choose their search engine carefully. To search the database of American camps that are accredited by the ACA, visit CampParents.org. To search the most comprehensive and trafficked site covering both American and Canadian camps, visit MySummerCamps.com. A review of other reputable search engines and camp database sites can be found in *The Summer Camp Handbook*, a preparatory resource for new campers and their families. Note that most libraries also carry camp resource books, such as *Peterson's Summer Opportunities for Kids and Teenagers* [7]. These are essentially paper versions of Internet databases.

Besides their premier search engine, the ACA has local offices that offer free camp referral services. Families can find the location and contact information for their local office by visiting ACAcamps.org. The ACA is a nonprofit organization that describes itself as "a community of camp professionals who, for nearly 100 years, have joined together to share our knowledge and experience and to ensure the quality of camp programs. As a leading authority in child development, the ACA works to preserve, promote, and improve the camp experience."

Health care providers and families should know that the ACA offers a rigorous and standardized accreditation process to interested camps, sponsors national and regional conferences for camping professionals, conducts research, publishes *Camping Magazine*, and raises money for camper scholarships and public education. The ACA is nonsectarian and its membership includes both secular and religiously affiliated camps. All member camps pay yearly dues. If a camp is ACA-accredited, families can be assured that the camp has met or exceeded more than 300 quality and safety standards.

There are also freelance camp consultants and various advisor services, some of whom work on commission from the camps they recommend. Health care providers should recommend that any family using a consultant or advisory service ask the following questions:

- Do you recommend only ACA-accredited camps or are some of your camps not accredited?
- What is your personal camping experience?
- How long have you been in the consulting business?
- Have you visited many camps, including the ones you recommend? Or, are you basing your recommendations only on what you've heard about different camps?
- Can you provide names of other satisfied clients? If not, why not?
- Do you work only with some camps and not others? If so, why? What kind of special agreements do you have with camps?
- Do you work on commission? If you're taking a percentage of the camp tuition, are you only recommending expensive camps?

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- If I have to pay you, is my satisfaction guaranteed? If my child and I don't like the camp, must I still pay?

Quality checklist

Health care providers can be especially helpful to new campers and their families by providing a checklist of quality indicators, many of which are listed below. Reviewing this list will help children and their parents narrow the camp choice to a few top choices.

1. The camp's features
   - Do you like the variety and type of activities? Do some activities cost extra?
   - Are the facilities and equipment in good shape? Are they what your child wants? Can campers bring their own equipment?
   - Is the dining cafeteria-style, family-style, or something else? Are the foods on the menu appetizing? Do they meet your child's dietary needs?
   - Is the variety of natural landscapes and manmade environments pleasing? Is the atmosphere of the camp commercial or natural?
   - Does your child like the way the camp structures the daily schedule, program choices, and grouping of campers? Are the child's favorite activities available often?
2. The camp's character
   - What kind of reputation and background does the camp have? Have there been significant staff, leadership, or facility changes lately? Why?
   - What experience and qualifications does the director have? Is the director easy to relate to? Does the director have a background in teaching or a child-related vocation?
   - Are the camp's traditions, mix of other children, and manners an asset?
   - Are the camp's mission, values, and discipline style appealing? How do cabin leaders provide support when campers need it? Do these philosophies match your own?
3. The camp's quality
   - Is the camp accredited by the American Camp Association?
   - How qualified are the instructors? Are instructors of high-risk programs certified?
   - Are most staff certified in first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)?
   - What is the camp's safety record?
   - Are the staff, especially the cabin leaders, experienced and well trained? Were they recruited from outside the camp, or were they once campers at that camp? Are they promoted based on how well they work with children? What is the average tenure of cabin leaders?

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- Do the international cabin leaders and instructors speak fluent English?
- What is the real camper-to-leader ratio? How much time do cabin leaders actually spend with their campers each day?
- Is the camp's health center clean and well equipped? Are the medical staff qualified? Is there a hospital and/or a doctor affiliated with the camp in case of emergencies?

4. The camp's service
   - Are you comfortable with the ways you can contact the camp in an emergency? Is it clear who is in charge at the camp?
   - Are you comfortable with the ways the camp permits parents and children to stay in contact, by phone, visits, letters, faxes, or e-mails?
   - Is the campers' contact with the "outside world" in the spirit of the camp? Are the out-of-camp trips well supervised? Are there extra fees involved?
5. The camp's cost
   - Can you afford the cost of the camp? Is it a good value?
   - Are the tuition, fees, and spending money allocations reasonable? Do they cover everything you want?
   - If the cost of the camps you like seems too high, have you researched scholarships? Even if you don't need a scholarship, what ways can your child help earn money for camp?
6. Personal interviews and inspections
   - Narrow your list down to five or six camps using Steps 1 to 5 above.
   - Contact the directors of those five or six camps and ask any unanswered questions that you have about their camp.
   - Contact personal references (parents and children who know the camp) and ask about their experiences.

If possible, schedule a time with the camp director when you can visit the camp and inspect its environment, atmosphere, facilities, and equipment yourself.

Supporting the choice

Once a family has made a choice and registered to attend a day or resident camp, health care providers can help support that choice in a number of ways. First, be sure the child is in as good physical and mental health as possible before opening day. Ensure that the child has had a recent physical exam and that the family has thoroughly completed the camp's health forms. Many physical and mental health problems are exacerbated at camp, or not properly treated at camp, solely as a function of the camp's lacking essential information about the child's health history and care.

Second, understand that it is normal for parents, children, or both to have second thoughts about the separation as opening day draws near.

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Encourage parents to share their anxieties with you or another adult, rather than with their children. Giving a child something to worry about while away at camp only serves to increase homesickness intensity. Rather than express anxiety or ambivalence, parents and health care providers should express confidence and optimism about the child's ability to endure, enjoy, and benefit from a camp experience. (For more information, see article on homesickness prevention elsewhere in this issue.)

Finally, if the child has unique or complex medical or mental health needs, health care providers should contact the camp well in advance of opening day and ask to speak with the camp's own doctor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker. Most camp directors are eager for their health care team to develop a customized treatment plan in collaboration with a child's local health care team. This practice ensures continuity of care and helps promote a child's positive adjustment to camp. Naturally, the better care children receive while away from home, the better the developmental outcomes of the camp experience.

Summary

The selection of a summer camp that best matches a child's interests, abilities, and developmental level is essential. Without a good match, children may not fully realize the beneficial outcomes of the camp experience. Health care providers can assist families in their consideration of camp type, location, length of stay, gender composition, and structure. Of special importance is communicating any special health care needs to the camp's director, health care providers, and front-line staff.

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