

# Burn Camps Offer Unique Growth Opportunities

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Only in the last 30 years have young burn survivors had the opportunity to meet other children and teens who have experienced a burn injury at what's become known as "burn camp." Since the establishment of a handful of camps in the 1980s, the number, according to the records of the International Association of Burn Camps, has grown to nearly 60. Fifty burn camps currently operate in North America, seven in Europe, and one each in Australia and Taiwan. Still more are in development. Most of these programs are free or nearly free for participants.

## TYPES OF BURN CAMPS

Although all burn camps strive to provide quality programming for burn survivors, camps do differ in the opportunities offered. Most camps are held in a traditional day camp or residential camp setting, while a few are structured around an "out-camp" experience, such as river rafting, backpacking, or canoe trips, where the entire group is removed from a standard cabin environment.

Regardless of setting, burn camps can be categorized into two basic types:

- **Fun-based camps:** Burn survivors attend fun-based camps to have fun and cultivate friendships with other burn survivors. The staff

at this type of camp may not include professionals trained to deal with the psychosocial impact of burn injuries and programming does not include counseling or other activities designed to help survivors tackle the emotional and social effects of their injuries in a planned or formal way. Peer interaction related to burn injury may occur spontaneously throughout the camp environment, but campers may not have access to staff trained to deal with the social and psychological challenges of being a burn survivor.

- **Challenged-based camps with psychosocial care:** Just as fun-based camps do, challenge-based camps provide burn survivors an opportunity to have fun and cultivate friendships with other burn survivors. In addition to fun activities, these camps include psychosocial care within the camp program and use group processing to teach goal-setting, problem-solving, and role-playing on how to move forward from the burn injury.

Currently, many camps fall somewhere in between these two types, incorporating focused activities that foster natural interactions and discussions between campers about living with a burn injury. Some camps may have psychosocial professionals available at camp who assist in planning programs to build self-esteem.

*Burn camp provides a supportive community of other burn survivors and persons who understand burns.*



photo courtesy of Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp

## MAKING THE CAMP DECISION

### Is Your Child Appropriate for Camp?

Burn survivors differ in their abilities to manage the stress of a burn injury. Moreover, the size of a survivor's injury does not necessarily correlate to the amount of stress they may feel as they re-integrate into their community after being discharged from the hospital.

Burn camp is a great option for children who

- Are reluctant to wear shorts or a swimsuit in public areas
- Have trouble talking about their burn injury with others
- Have been teased about their burn scars
- Have never met other young burn survivors
- Are reluctant to discuss their challenges with their parents

While not all burn survivors may need camp, many who could benefit are afraid to ask about the opportunity. Some youngsters with small burns may even feel unworthy of the experience. Whatever the circumstances, all burn camp programs strive to help the burn patient become a *survivor* and not a *victim*.

Even young burn survivors who feel they have dealt successfully with the effects of their injury can play a valuable role at burn camp. Specifically, they can support and inspire their fellow campers who are still grappling with issues. In addition, young burn survivors who may have dealt with issues successfully may face new concerns as they mature. An ongoing relationship with a burn camp community can provide young survivors with easily accessible support as their circumstances change.

### Is Your Child Ready for Camp?

Two of the best indicators parents can use to gauge their child's readiness for burn camp are medical stability and emotional enthusiasm. As noted above, different burn camps provide different levels of medical, nursing, psychosocial, and physical and/or occupational therapy care, but participants must, at a minimum, be medically stable enough to participate in a rigorous, adventuresome, outdoor experience. To determine whether a child is physically ready for a particular camp, parents should consult their child's physician and the camp director to determine that the services and programs available at that camp can support a child's current physical needs and abilities.

Parents can assess enthusiasm by answering a few different questions:

- Is my child suggesting a camp experience?
- Has my child responded positively to suggestions about camp?
- Is my child expressing interest in social activities?
- Does my child talk about exploring the world beyond his or her school and neighborhood?

In addition, parents should have their son or daughter spend some practice time away from home, without them, in order to gauge their child's self-reliance. A long weekend at a friend's or relative's house or an overnight school trip may give parents clues about their child's maturity and independence.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BURN CAMP?

The core benefits for burn camp participants are the natural growth of friendships and of one's authentic self. As many young



photo courtesy of Univ of UT  
Health Care Burn Center Camps

Some camps are structured around an "out-camp" experience, such as river rafting.

burn survivors say, "At camp, I make friends and I get to be myself." Key to this growth is the immersion in a supportive community of other burn survivors and persons who understand burns. The opportunity to try new activities and face challenges is also important for campers' growth.

A burn patient's psychosocial needs cannot be predicted perfectly from the size of burn, location of burn, or time since injury, so any burn camp that nurtures friendships, includes fun activities, and develops young people's authentic selves is likely to be beneficial. Camps with adaptive recreation and psychosocial professionals on staff may provide additional benefits because young burn survivors experience support and opportunities tailored to their specific needs. Some burn camps even extend their professional psychosocial services by offering parent support groups prior to camp and sibling support groups before, during, or after camp.

## MATCHING THE CAMPER TO THE CAMP

Parents should also keep in mind that just as burn survivors are not identical, neither are camps. Parents should evaluate the camps they are considering to carefully match their child's needs with an appropriate program. (Visit the IABC website, [www.iaburncamps.org](http://www.iaburncamps.org), or contact the Phoenix Society at 800-888-2876 for an up-to-date list of burn camps or contact the burn center closest to you for information on a burn camp in your area.) The camp a young burn survivor attends should be based on his or her interests, abilities, and needs, as well as local availability. Keep in mind that not all camps accept campers who have not been treated by the burn center(s) with which they are affiliated (if applicable) or from outside a predetermined geographic area.

## QUALITY PARAMETERS TO CONSIDER

The most important indicators of a camp's quality are tenure, accreditation, reputation, and a parent's gut instinct. Tenure encompasses the number of years the camp's director has been in his or her position, the return rate of the staff, and the return rate of age-eligible campers. Parents should inquire and discuss these figures with the camp's director. The more good people stay with a camp from season to season, the more likely that camp possesses positive attributes.

All camp facilities should be licensed by the state or provincial Board of Health. Accreditation, by contrast, is voluntary, and holds camps to multiple, sometimes higher, standards. Although parents could assess the hundreds of quality components involved in accreditation by the American Camp Association (ACA) or one of the 10 Canadian provincial camp associations, the ACA or a Canadian camp association "seal" saves time. Accreditation is not a quality guarantee, but it confirms that the camp periodically meets reasonable industry practices.

A camp's reputation can speak volumes about its quality, so parents should talk to hospital personnel, other parents, and veteran campers to hear first-hand narratives of participants' experiences. In the end, parents and prospective campers should trust their gut instinct. Attending to the "feel" or "vibe" or "impressions" of a camp can be unusually informative.

### Questions to Ask

In addition to questions about tenure and accreditation, parents should ask camp directors the following:

- **How is your staff trained?** Burn camp staff may have professional credentials in nursing, medicine, firefighting, or some form of therapy, but they also need camp-specific training in child development, behavior management, and leadership.
- **What is the camp's philosophy and how is its mission put into action?** Look for camps that clearly state what opportunities they provide and how they specifically support young people's growth.
- **How do campers receive additional medical, social, or emotional support?** All child burn survivors need a chance to play and to "just be themselves." For the times when additional support is needed, the camp's facility and staff should be professionally prepared.

### Organizations You and Your Camp Should Know

Twenty-nine burn camp programs worldwide currently are members of the International Association of Burn Camps, which was founded in 2001. The group's purpose is to help burn camps achieve a high level of professional behavior within the camp environment and to provide a network for the mutual benefit of local and regional organizations that serve the burn community.



photo courtesy of Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp

Horseback riding is a popular activity at many camps.

The IABC recommends that burn camps have a relationship with local firefighters and burn centers to provide the best camp environment for the burn survivor.

The American Burn Association (ABA), the International Association of Firefighters Burn Foundation (IAFFBF), and the Phoenix Society, who have a collaborative relationship within the international burn community, advocate a holistic approach to burn care. Parents should inquire about a camp's relationship with the IABC, ABA, IAFFBF, and Phoenix Society. Involvement with these organizations helps increase awareness of current issues and networking opportunities.

## PREPARING YOUR CAMPER

In addition to assessing the camp's credentials, talking with the director, and arranging "practice" time away from home, parents should do the following before their child heads to camp for the first time:

- **Consider siblings.** Ask whether the burn camp accepts siblings or look for a separate camp that matches the sibling's interests, abilities, psychosocial needs, and developmental level.
- **Involve your child in camp planning and preparation.** The more children feel part of the decision to attend camp, the more ownership they feel and the more positive their adjustment is likely to be. Involve children in shopping and packing for camp as well.
- **Consider purchasing the American Camp Association's camp prep program.** This DVD/CD set for new campers and their families has been shown to prevent severe homesickness and soothe parents' separation anxiety. Visit <http://ACAacamps.org/bookstore> for *The Secret Ingredients of Summer Camp Success*.

## THE VALUE OF THE CAMP EXPERIENCE

Although more research is needed to understand the precise methods and beneficial outcomes of burn camps, the past 30 years have created community, built camaraderie, and taught coping in ways previously undiscovered. Bringing young burn survivors together in beautiful outdoor settings, away from home, with terrific recreation is an unmatched developmental highlight for most children. Camp, along with other programs and resources such as school reentry, World Burn Congress, and sibling or family programs, aids not only the child but the entire family as they heal from the impact of a burn injury.

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