

CHADD's Guide to Fin

BY CHADD STAFF

WHILE IT MAY SEEM TOO EARLY to start planning for summer at the start of winter, finding a camp for your child with ADHD can be stressful. You may be tempted to procrastinate, but starting your search now will pay off. Finding the right summer camp takes research and many discussions.

To keep from getting overwhelmed, consider the following:

- Specialized camps fill their slots quickly. After children have positive camp experiences, their relieved parents immediately sign them up for the next summer, leaving few spots for late-comers. Waiting until February or March may be too late!
- If your child has severe symptoms, especially challenging behaviors, there are fewer camps that can really work with your child—and those will be in high demand.
- The early bird gets the scholarship worm. For many families cost is an issue, and specialized camps can be expensive. Fortunately, many camps offer financial assistance, but it goes quickly.

Begin your search

John Willson, executive director of SOAR Camp and a former member of CHADD's board of directors, discussed the array of camp options and what parents need to consider during an Ask the Expert webinar. "There are a host of wonderful and unique programs across the country that have worked hard to establish services for young people with ADHD," he said. Knowing what to look for is important.

Willson suggests you consider:

- your child's strengths and interests
- your family's needs during the summer months
- your child's needs for structure and supervision
- your child's sibling relationships and if siblings should camp separately or together

First, evaluate your child's strengths and weaknesses. Determine areas your child needs to work on (academics, behavior, social skills, etc.), select one or two areas, and focus on those. Then weigh her strengths and try to maintain a balance between work and play; this will help keep things both productive and positive.

It is very important to talk to your child. Get his input about how he would like to spend his summer and include him in the discussions about possible camps. Being part of the process can help a child overcome any anxieties he might have and may lead to more positive feelings about camp.

Review the available options. The summer camp experience is no longer just a choice between day or overnight. There are many more possibilities to consider, including adventure camps, science camps, church camps, community or parks and recreation department camps, camps that last for a few days or all summer long, specialty camps that focus on academics, behavior or social skills, and camps designed specifically for kids with ADHD or LD. Think about which environment might work best for your child.

While summer is a time to let loose, often kids with ADHD still require some structure to their day. If your child does better in a structured environment, make sure the camps you are considering have a consistent daily schedule that is clearly communicated to the campers.

Is your child burned out academically? If so, a good option might be a camp that focuses on being outdoors or on a favorite activity, such as soccer or theater. For many children with ADHD, self-esteem takes a hit during the school year. Focusing on an area where your child excels can help rebuild self-confidence, while still improving an area of weakness.



Finding a Summer Camp

Identify potential camps

Here's how to find specific camps.

- Ask parents in your neighborhood, school, church, local CHADD affiliate—or in our online community ADHD Parents Together (healthunlocked.com/adhd-parents). Learning from the experiences of other families can save you time, money, and grief.
- Ask your child's doctor, therapist, school counselor, teacher, coach, scout leader, or religious leader for recommendations.
- Search for specialty camps online.
 - The American Camping Association (acacamps.org) allows you to search by specialty, such as “behavioral” or “gifted” and special needs such as ADHD. Click on “Find a camp.”
 - My Summer Camps (mysummercamps.com) searches by category; for example, Special Needs, Learning Disabilities, and ADHD.

The winter months are a good time to explore funding options to fill any gaps between the cost of summer camp and what you can afford. According to John Willson, the majority of summer camps have financial aid available. Ask about financial assistance and how to obtain tuition support when you speak with a prospective camp.

Talk to local businesses and service organizations such as the Elks, Lions, or Kiwanis Clubs to see if they can offer any assistance. Gather information on scholarships and apply early; many have application deadlines in early March. Another good strategy is to start setting money aside months ahead of time to offset the camp payment.

Make your selection

Once you have narrowed down your list of choices, call and ask a lot of questions. Good camps are not only willing to answer questions, they welcome them. Some good questions are:

- How is staff selected and trained? Are the counselors high school kids or college students who are studying special education or psychology? How old are direct supervisors and program instructors? What qualifications, experience, or certifications are required?
- What is the ratio of counselors to campers? How closely are children supervised?
- Does the camp have medical personnel to administer the child's medication, if needed?
- What behavior management techniques are used?
- What are the behavioral expectations for campers, and what consequences may result from failure to meet them?
- Is the day structured? How is the schedule communicated to the campers?
- Are scholarships available, and how does one obtain them?

Be sure to ask about communication between camp and home. It is important for the camp to be a good fit for your child and your parenting style. For example, some camps encourage kids not to call home while working through homesickness or behaviors while other camps send daily emails with comments from staff. Finally, ask if the camp has experience handling coexisting conditions or situations that are unique to your child.

After you have the answers to these questions, you are ready to make your decision. Remember that you know your child better than anyone. So, do your reading, get input from others, and then trust your instincts. Then you can relax because you've got summer camp covered—and it's still winter. 🎧

CHADD staff members **Karen Sampson Hoffman** and **Susan Buningh**, and former NRC staff member **Jar Lampard**, contributed to this article.

MORE INFO

Watch the free Ask the Expert webcast, *Finding the Right Summer Camp for Your Child with ADHD*. http://www.chadd.org/Training-Events/Ask-the-Expert/Ask-the-Expert-Video.aspx?id=3_OK_QzPgIs

