

TIME WELL SPENT

Why Summer Camp Should Be a Part of Your Child's Growth Continuum

by John Willson, MS, LRT/CTRS, and Elizabeth Simpson, PhD

AS PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH ADHD, we often get caught up in the struggles they are prone have. They tend to be anxious, struggle with poor social skills and emotional coping skills, perseverate on things they are interested in to the exclusion of everything else, and have poor organizational and executive functioning skills. In addition, many of our kids have a hard time making and keeping friends and have never spent the night away from home.

The struggle is real. The great news is we also know our child has special gifts that others often overlook. They notice details others miss, can be incredibly sensitive to the needs of other people, feel things deeply, and tap into a creative side that leaves us marveling at their creations.

All that being said, we still worry every day about their well-being and future. It's what we do, and why we search long and hard for opportunities that nurture their gifts and help them overcome their challenges. The school year is often fraught with experiences that aren't exactly designed to nurture those strengths or help children overcome their daily struggles. The summer, on the other hand, can be an incredible opportunity for the kind of growth and learning parents hope for on a daily basis.

Summer camp might be the perfect place to start. You might ask yourself, "Camp? Why on earth would I consider dropping off my child with ADHD in the middle of the summer for ten to eighteen days at a sleep-away camp with a bunch of strangers? Are you crazy?"

Perhaps, but consider this: Camps are designed to nurture independence, provide experiences that tap into the creative energy your children have, and learn to problem solve and overcome obstacles. Furthermore, when you decide to send your child to a camp that truly understands this population and is designed to serve children diagnosed with ADHD, you get the additional peace of mind that growth is happening while you are getting some rest as well. Given the time and effort you're putting

in around the clock to help your child be their best self, you do deserve a break. But the real reason has more to do with your child's best interests than with yours.

WHY A CAMP SETTING?

Many of your child's difficulties are a result of being in environments that do not understand the nature and complexity of living with ADHD. It is difficult for our children to learn how to live with and find their strengths within their experience with ADHD if the environment is constantly working against them. Unfortunately, many traditional school settings do not have the resources they need to help our children grow and develop into the wonderful individuals they are meant to be.

Our children thrive in specially designed environments built to support their development and strengths and help them to mediate their challenges. Most overnight summer camps for our population are designed to do just that. As the founder of SOAR, an adventure camp specifically designed to meet the needs of youth with ADHD, Jonathan Jones says: "Our understanding of this population is engrained in everything we do; the way we approach challenges and adventures, the way we structure each day, the way we handle conflicts, and the way we celebrate each participant's abilities."

Summer camp also provides an immersive environment that allows our children to grow in a holistic way. For twenty-four hours a day, they are surrounded by peers who are just like them. Everyone is working toward the same goal: to be the best version of themselves they can be. Since everyone is on the same page, friendships are forged and social skills are sharpened. Staff work side by side with each child to help them assess their challenges, set attainable goals, and celebrate their many successes. The youth learn right away that they are part a team, a partnership, and everyone's success depends on their collaboration and participation in the group.



FINDING THE RIGHT CAMP

So how do you find the right overnight camp for your child? Here are ten tips and questions to consider that might guide your decision.

- 1. Be sure the camp is grounded in a philosophy that is supportive of the developmental needs of your child.** How do they handle discipline, emotional coping, organizational development and peer relationship? Does the camp hold a philosophy that will support your child's ultimate success?
- 2. Does the camp give your child ample opportunities to find and utilize their strengths?** Some of the gifts of ADHD are creativity, curiosity, independence, high energy, risk-taking, daydreaming, and spontaneous idea generation. These same gifts are often mentioned when talking about successful inventors, entrepreneurs, and thought leaders. Does the camp provide activities that stimulate the leader, entrepreneur, and explorer within your child?
- 3. Does the camp have a collaborative intake and debrief process to help set goals with you and your child that will support their developmental needs?**
- 4. What is the staff-to-student ratio?** Will that ratio meet the needs of your child?
- 5. How does the camp handle medications?** If medications are administered, does the program take medication delivery seriously and have an effective system to make sure medications get delivered on time?
- 6. Is the camp accredited by the American Camp Association?** Insuring that peer reviews and standards are maintained is an important part step in insuring your comfort with leaving your child in their care.
- 7. Ask them about some scenarios you might see playing out with your child and gauge your comfort level with how they might handle them.** This insight will give you a real feel

for the placement you're looking into.

- 8. Does the camp send home a report of your child's experience?** This type of documentation can be an incredible way to learn more about what your child accomplished at camp, and can also be used as a tool to share with other professionals who work with your child.
- 9. How does the camp handle technology?** If you want your child to unplug and reset, this is a particularly important question to ask. As technology has become intertwined with the way our children perceive the world, having them get a break from that may be important to you.
- 10. Ask for parent references.** Part of doing your homework and feeling good about the experience is to talk with other parents who have sent their kids to camp in order to get a feel for what the program is like.

Do your homework and find a camp that will help your child thrive this summer. It will be a great experience for you both! ☺

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