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# *Choosing the Right Camp* **FOR YOUR CHILD**



## THE BEST QUESTIONS TO ASK

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*by Roughing It  
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# About the Authors



**Ann and Hobie Woods each have over 50 years of experience in camps and organized youth programs, beginning as camp counselors when they were in college. They founded Roughing It Day Camp in 1972, and live in Lafayette, California. Hobie has served on the Northern California Section Board of the American Camping Association as Education Chair and Section President. Ann has served as the Public Relations Chair on the Board of the Northern California Section of the American Camping Association, as the national day camp representative on the Association of Independent Camps, and on the National Board of the American Camping Association as Chair of the Public Awareness Committee. Ann and Hobie have presented a number of workshops locally, nationally, and in Japan. They have been featured in the San Francisco Chronicle, in the Contra Costa Times and on CNN television. They have owned and operated their own camp for over 40 years.**

# *a Brief* **INTRODUCTION**

With more choices than ever before, parents are faced with a difficult and complicated decision when selecting the camp that will best meet their child's needs. When parents entrust their child to another individual or organization, the critical concerns should deal with the safety and well being of their child.

The real questions should be who and how will my child be watched so he/she has a safe, positive experience.

So, you have decided to send your child to camp this summer! Now the more difficult decision...which one?

All camps are not all alike and no one camp can meet the needs of every child.

The truth is, there are good camps, excellent camps, and as in any business, there are camps that are poorly managed. There are also camps that are better for your particular child, and others that are not the right match. Camps are organized differently, managed differently and strive to achieve very different goals.





# *Just about* **EVERY** *different kind of* **CAMP** *is available.*

It is useful to establish your preferences before you begin to research camp programs.







# Choosing **A Camp**

Finding the right camp for your child can be a bit overwhelming.

Before you begin the process of selecting a camp, take a few minutes to think about your own preferences. What impact do you want the camp experience to have on your child? Are you looking for a camp to fill some free summer days or to help your child grow? Do you want your child to build sports skills or interpersonal skills? Are you looking for a fun, entertaining program that gets the kids out of the house, or would you prefer a camp that works to build social skills and group cooperation? Do you want your child to acquire computer and academic enrichment skills in a more scholastic atmosphere or to be outdoors, learning new skills in swimming, boating, and equestrian activities?

Just about every different kind of camp imaginable is available. It is useful to establish your preferences before you begin to research camp programs.

## DIFFERENT RESEARCH OPTIONS

Consider obtaining information from the camp itself, campers, camper parents, staff, educators, neighbors and even other camps. It's often helpful to meet directly with camp owners, directors, and staff to help with questions and concerns. Camps will have orientation days, or may bring staff to camp fairs and presentations. If you are planning ahead, you can arrange a visit to the camp before the start of the summer



*A reputable camp will enthusiastically provide information concerning the camp's standards, philosophy, and the methods employed to help their campers get the most from their camp experience.*

## DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS

No question or concern is trivial where your child's welfare is concerned! A reputable camp will enthusiastically provide information concerning the camp's standards, philosophy, and the methods employed to help their campers get the most from their camp experience. Most camp directors love to talk to parents about their camp.



# *the Best* **Questions to Ask**

## **Who Owns and Operates this Camp?**

Most camps fall into one of three basic ownership categories—sponsoring, organization, corporate owner and independent owner. Understanding the ownership of the camp lends insight into the kind of experience the camp will provide. Many camps are owned and operated by organizations. Parents should understand and support the mission, goals and role of the organization before they entrust their child to the camp.

Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Campfire, YMCA, Salvation Army and other national youth organizations have very active summer camp programs. These groups have national staffs that organize and coordinate camp programs and are often considered leaders in the camping field.

Some camps are owned and operated by corporations or by private companies. In these camps, hired directors may change every year or two, which can result in the lack of a cohesive program and long-term stability.

Some of the finest camps in the country are owned by individuals. One of the strongest reasons for considering such camps is that the owners have generally been personally involved in every aspect of the camp over a long period of time. Campers are generally better served either by a camp that is owned by a youth organization or by a camp that is independently owned AND directed.

## **What types of program activities does the camp offer?**

In selecting a camp, keep in mind what you want your child to learn at camp, and what your child is like so that you end up with a camp you will both love. It is important to use the summer to expose your child to new experiences and to get him/her to try new things. However, you do not want to get your child too far out of his/her comfort zone. Some parents will select a particular camp because they want their child to be more active, and meet new friends/have new experiences. Their child may see that the camp offers crafts and swimming which he/she really likes, and fishing and horseback riding which they want to try. So in selecting this camp both the parents and the child are happy and both have their needs and expectations met.

## **What is the camp director's experience?**

ACA standards recommend directors have a bachelor's degree, have completed in-service training within the past three years, and have at least 16 weeks of camp administrative experience"

([www.acacamps.org/parents/safetytips.php](http://www.acacamps.org/parents/safetytips.php)).

It is also important to find out how long the director has been with the camp. It is recommended that parents meet and learn about the experience of the actual director who will be in charge of the camp site their child is going to attend.



## **What is the camp's philosophy in working with children?**

Parents will want to find a camp with a philosophy that they support and believe will be beneficial for their child. Ask specifically about how the camp handles competition, awards/recognition, camp rules and discipline. It is also helpful to find out if the staff is trained in counseling and leadership skills. You want your child to learn and try new activities, and to have fun in an environment that is both emotionally and physically safe.

## **Does the camp also teach or reinforce values that build character?**

Beyond the fun and activities, camp can be a life changing experience. It is recommended that parents look for a camp that also helps campers learn life skills as one of the outcomes it offers. Camp is a perfect place to teach and re-enforce values such as independence, resiliency, compassion, collaboration, teamwork, kindness, loyalty, creativity, friendship making and keeping skills, and leadership.

## **Is the camp accredited by the American Camp Association (ACA)?**

An ACA accredited camp has gone through a review with up to 300 standards in four areas of camp operation including staff qualifications, staff training, health and safety

standards, and risk management.

Accreditation assures parents that the camp is committed to meeting the standards of the industry and in fostering a safe and nurturing environment. It is also a good idea to find out how long the camp has been accredited.

## **What is the staff to camper ratio?**

Knowing the staff to camper ratio gives you an insight into the supervision a camp offers. The number should include the total number of available staff (counselors, program, and administrative staff) who will be at camp providing supervision. ACA recommends the following staff to camper ratios at day camps: 1:6 for campers ages 4 and 5 years, 1:8 for campers ages 6 to 8 years; 1:10 for campers ages 9 to 14 years; and 1:12 for campers ages 15 to 17. Ask your camp about the Adult Staff to Camper ratio.

## **Is Adult Supervision of your child CONSTANT?**

This is one of the most important questions to ask a camp. Most parents think that their camper will be safe at camp because they assume their child will be constantly supervised by the adult staff members.

However, this is often not the case. Some camps use teens or Jr. Counselors to supervise the campers in non-structured periods of the day when there are no or minimal adult staff members present.



### What is the camper return rate?

The number of campers who return each year speaks to the integrity of the camp and its ability to successfully deliver a positive experience for the campers. The average camper return rate for most day camps is 30%, and for most resident camps is 50%.

*Parents should feel comfortable with the supervision standards at the camp they select for their child*



### Staff Certifications

Certifications show that a camp has taken the time and effort to recruit and train the best possible staff. It is strongly recommended that parents confirm how many staff members within the camp have one or more of the following safety certifications:

- First Aid- American Red Cross or National Safety Council
- CPR- American Red Cross or American Heart Association
- Lifeguard- American Red Cross, YMCA Lifeguard Training, or Jeff Ellis
- Swim Instructor- American Red Cross Water Safety Instruction (WSI), or YMCA Training
- Horseback Riding- Camp Horsemanship Association Instructor, or HAS
- Drivers- Commercial Class B Driver's License with Passenger Endorsement

### How does the camp prepare staff to work with children?

Basic camp operations, safety supervision and the development of programs that enhance individual growth of the child are very important. Camps have a responsibility to train and orient their staff in accepted policies, procedures, and methods of the camp operation.

Three to six days is the minimum amount of time most camps consider necessary to adequately train a staff for the summer season. Many camps have even more extensive training for their staffs. It is recommended to ask the camp owner about the training programs provided for their staff.

## What kinds of standards are the director and staff expected to maintain?

Does the camp have policies that govern staff-to-staff, staff-to-camper and camper-to-camper behaviors? All staff should behave in a manner that you would want your child to adopt.

The camp director and staff become important role models for the campers. Campers WILL model the character and behavior of the camp leaders and other adult role models at camp. In addition to your child's counselor, this includes other staff, camp support staff, the directors, the owners, etc. Grooming, appearance and staff attire are also important because of the impact that they will have on each child.

As a parent, you want to find a camp that hires staff that are screened for:

- Appropriate language, dress, and behavior
- Drug and alcohol use
- References and or/background checks

## How much turnover is there among the staff during the summer?

It is important to get a feeling for how long the staff members are generally employed at the camp. You should be certain that most or all of the staff will not change during the time that your child is in camp. It is even better if the whole staff is at the camp for the entire summer season. Staff changes during a camp session are disruptive to children, breaking the group building and social learning dimension of the camp.

It is also useful to learn how many seasoned staff returns to the camp each year, lending continuity to the programs year to year.

## How is the camp program organized?

There are two basic categories of summer camps: those that are activity-focused and those that are focused on the social development of the camper group. Camps that emphasize activities usually have a more structured schedule that keeps campers engaged in specific activities the majority of the time.

Often these camps allow each camper to select his/her own schedule of camp activities. This type of program tends to place more emphasis on the camp activities and individual camper choice. Camps that have more of a child development focus emphasize social growth, and set aside specific time to encourage group building and child development.

There are time periods for group meetings, planning sessions, service projects, group get-togethers, and more of the group living activities. These kinds of camps tend to have campers maintain a cohesive camper group throughout the camp day.

Parents must decide what kind of camp will best fit the personality needs of their child; activity-focused with an emphasis on acquiring physical skills or child-focused with an emphasis on team building and social growth.







*Open and clear communication between the camper family and the camp is vital to ensure a successful experience for the camper.*

### **Will my child be given formal instruction or free play in camp activities?**

Some camps have formal instruction programs for campers based on individual skill levels. These camps may even have competency skill tests at the end of the session. Other camps offer a purely recreational approach to activities.

A clear example of the contrast would be a camp that offers the formal American Red Cross swimming instruction and another that opens the pool to campers for recreation only. Both camps offer “swimming,” but the experience is very different.

### **Are the camp activities organized with cooperative or competitive emphasis?**

Some camps are very competitive in their organization and program activities. These camps have leagues, ladders, competitions, awards, swim meets, horse shows, etc. Some even have summer-long competitions between various camper groups or teams. Other camps make a concerted effort to deemphasize competition using non-competitive variants of traditional sports. In these programs, all children regardless of their individual skill level are encouraged to participate in new activities without concern about winning or losing.

### **How much time will my child spend outdoors?**

One of the most important elements of a child’s summer camp experience can be the outdoors. This is thought by many to be the major distinguishing element between camp and other organizations such as school, childcare, sports programs, etc. Many experts agree that the best camp programs are those that maximize the time children spend outdoors as children reap many benefits from such an experience.



## How long are camp sessions?

Traditionally, organized summer camps were long-term and sustained experiences. Children used to go to camp for eight to ten weeks during the summer. There are many benefits to longer sessions as they allow for a sustained experience that even first time campers could benefit from, including greater social growth, skill development, and a more constant community experience. However, modern family schedules have both parents and children so busy that many cannot make the eight-week week commitment. Most camps now offer shorter sessions to accommodate the busier schedules. There are also some campers that may be more reluctant to commit to longer sessions, and perhaps a shorter session would be less intimidating for them to start with. For some it takes time to adjust, but a constant routine and familiarity will increase their confidence and comfort at camp.

## How independent does the camper need to be to succeed at the camp?

Camps generally expect campers to be potty-trained, drug and alcohol-free, and willing to participate in the camp program. Most camps offer a mixture of self-care and camp provided service for campers. Parents should seek the type of care that will best serve the needs of their child.

The majority of resident camps provide some or all meals, laundry is done for campers and some indoor activity space is provided.

Some resident camps, such as outdoor wilderness camps, offer campers the opportunity to take care of all their own outdoor living responsibilities. Campers plan



*One of the best ways to gain a broader perspective on any camp under consideration is talking to parents of past campers. We recommend asking the camp for references.*

and prepare their own meals, construct their own shelters, clean and care for their own sanitation and learn to become self-sufficient in the outdoors. If your child has special needs beyond those that the camp staff are trained and prepared to deal with, including special medication needs, it is very important to discuss your child's situation with the camp director prior to registration.

The director will work with parents to determine how the camp can accommodate a child with special needs. Open and clear communication between the camper family and the camp is vital to ensure a successful experience for the camper.

There are some camps within the San Francisco Bay Area that specialize in children with special needs. You can call the ACA (American Camping Association) in Marin for more information.



# Beginning **THE SEARCH**

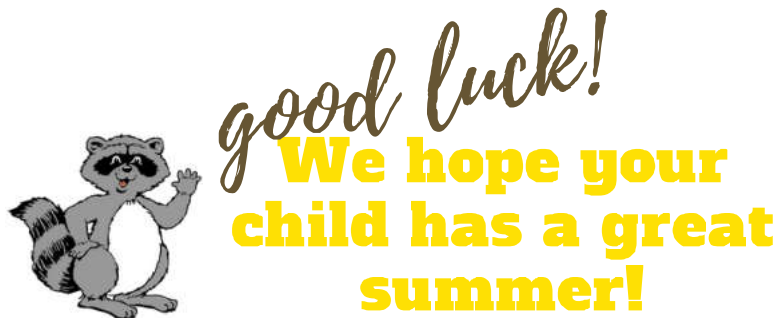
There are a wide variety of day camps and resident camps in the San Francisco Bay Area and Northern California. Listings and information for these camps are available through many sources:

- Online camp directories
- Parenting magazines/Newspapers
- Local camp fairs
- Friends and Neighbors
- American Camping Association—Northern California Section  
1-800-362-2236 [www.ACAcamps.org](http://www.ACAcamps.org)

After calling camps, requesting brochures, and visiting their websites, this booklet will better prepare you to compare and contrast each option.

## References for the Camp

One of the best ways to gain a broader perspective on any camp under consideration is talking to the parents of past campers. Ask the camp for references; look for a parent reference in your town, or in your child's school to contact.





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