

# Summer Planning for Children with Special Needs

Summer vacation often poses a challenge for parents of children with special needs. You can find programs that will provide an engaging and enriching environment for your child, but it's important to start thinking early about what kinds of activities your child would benefit from and what your options are.

## Determining your child's needs

When choosing a summer program, it's important to consider your child's age, interests, and personality. You'll also want to think about how summer activities can help support your child's year-round learning. Here are some questions that can help you determine what kind of summer program would be good for your child:

- What would your child enjoy? Many children have a particular passion, such as music or animals. If your child has a special interest like this, look for summer programs that would encourage her passion, such as a zoo program or a music camp.
- What skills is he working on? A child who needs help learning to read could benefit from a program that provides specialized reading tutoring. If he's been focusing on socialization skills, a noncompetitive camp setting with lots of interaction with other children could be a good opportunity to continue learning how to interact with others. If he needs to acquire skills that will help him get a job in the future, maybe an internship would be a good idea. Think about the goals he has been working toward during the school year and how he could continue making progress over the summer. Your child's Individualized Education program (IEP) can serve as a guide.
- Does your child have difficulty with new or unfamiliar situations? If so, a camp or other program may be challenging. Talk with other parents in your child's class or your neighborhood to see if your children could attend a program together.

## Exploring the options

As you begin to explore the activities and programs in your community, remember that your child's options aren't necessarily limited because of her disability. You don't have to focus your search on programs for children with special needs. The law says most providers have to accept your child. And with the right resources, some extra planning, and good communication with care providers, you can create a positive situation almost anywhere.

The first place you should go to find out about summer programs in your community is your child's school staff. Your child's teachers can probably recommend programs and activities that have been accommodating and successful for children with special needs. You may also want to talk to other parents for ideas.

### Here are some options that may be available in your community:

- Local park and community-center recreation programs. These are often half-day or all-day programs, sometimes in special areas like sports, art, or music. In many parts of the country, programs like these cost less than other options, but some have residency requirements. These programs tend to have limited hours (often 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.), but some offer extended-day coverage for an extra fee.
- Day camps. Many religious organizations, Boys and Girls Clubs, Y's, and schools offer day camps. Like recreation programs, they tend to have limited hours, but some offer extended-day coverage.
- Activity programs and workshops. Some organizations like museums and nature societies offer short-term workshops in a variety of areas. Organizations might include language-school programs, theater-sponsored workshops, music-school programs, museum programs, or public library summer-reading programs.
- Expanded after-school programs. Before- and after-school programs that operate during the school year at Y's, schools, or other community agencies sometimes expand to offer full-day care during the summer, even for children who aren't enrolled during the school year.
- Overnight camps. Overnight camps may offer stays by the week, month, or all summer. Some camps are oriented toward specific activities, such as sports, nature, or the arts. Some also provide opportunities for overnight adventure trips, like whitewater rafting or backpacking.

Again, keep in mind that it's against the law for a provider to tell you that your child cannot be admitted to a program because of his disability. Also remember that many options and ideas are available for making a situation work. For example, if your child needs one-on-one assistance at a camp but the camp cannot provide this, your insurance company or state department that oversees the welfare of children with disabilities may be able to pay for an extra teacher, aide, or counselor.

## **Taking a closer look**

Once you have found a handful of programs you think might work, it's time to do some in-depth research. Here are some questions you might ask as you learn more about each program.

- What is the program philosophy? Well-run camps have clearly stated goals. Look for programs that will be a good match with your child's personality and increase her sense of confidence and self-esteem. Consider whether your child will do better in a competitive environment or one that is cooperative.
- How much training and experience do staff members have? Will they welcome your child or be intimidated by her? Teenagers earning a summer salary can be wonderfully enthusiastic; in some cases, though, well-trained adults might provide a better experience for your child. Are staff members able to make needed accommodations? Are they willing to work closely with your child's aide? Can they effectively manage your child's behavior in a way that makes you feel comfortable?
- What is the ratio of staff members to kids? A program with one adult for every two children will be quite different from a program with one adult for every ten. If your child will be attending camp, you should consider the staffing guidelines of the American Camp Association (ACA), which take into consideration the age and special needs of participants. For example, the ACA recommends a ratio of 1:1 for campers with severe mental disabilities. Check the ACA Web site at [www.acacamps.org](http://www.acacamps.org) for more information.
- What kind of medical facilities or professionals are on site? Find out if a nurse is available and how medications are dispensed. If your child needs medication or may need other medical care, you will want to be sure that the program has good personnel and procedures in place. For example, if your child takes insulin, be sure that there is a designated, safe storage area for the medication. Also make sure that the camp staff is trained to respond to medical emergencies, such as seizures.
- Are the facilities accessible? Remember that solutions are available to many accessibility issues, but those solutions will only be successful if the program staff is willing to work with you.
- How will you communicate with staff members and with your child? If your child will be attending a day program, find out if you will have opportunities to speak with counselors at drop-off and pick-up time. Will staff members be readily available by phone or e-mail? If your child will be attending an overnight camp, find out how often you will be able to speak with him.
- What are the sleeping, bathing, and eating arrangements? If you are considering overnight camp, you will want to be sure that your child will be comfortable and will get the help she needs to be able to fully participate in the program. If your child requires a special diet, make sure the camp can provide it.
- What do other parents think of the program? No matter what kind of program you are considering, ask for references, and try to talk to at least three parents to get a good idea of what you and your child can expect.

## **Paying for your child's summer program**

Some programs, especially those designed specifically for children with special needs, can be expensive. But it's a mistake to avoid looking at these programs just because of the cost. You may have more options than you think.

You may be able to get some or all of the cost for your child's summer program paid for by your school district. If you can prove that your child will be working on the skills outlined in his IEP at the summer program, the school district may pay for it. Be sure to talk with school or district administrators early in the process if you will be asking for the school district to cover some or all of the cost of your child's summer program.

## Making it work

Choosing a summer program or activity is only the first step toward creating a fun and enriching summer for your child. You'll also need to develop a plan to communicate with the staff at the program or camp and take other steps to ensure your child's experience is a positive one. Here are some tips that can help:

- Get to know the camp or program staff. Visit the camp site and make arrangements to meet as many program staff members as you can. A good relationship with staff members is the best way to ensure your child has a great experience.
- Ask who should be your main point of contact. You'll want to have lots of day-to-day communication with counselors or staff members, but it's also a good idea to develop a relationship with one administrator or program director. This is the person you'll call whenever you have any concerns or questions. Make sure your contact person knows how to reach you at work and at home and encourage her to call you with any information, negative or positive.
- Educate staff about your child. It's important that any staff members who will be interacting with your child understand his condition or disability. If you have brochures about the condition, distribute those. You can also print fact sheets off the Internet or get them from your health care provider. In addition to understanding your child's specific condition, it's important that the staff learn something about your child personally. For example, if your child does best when she is interacting with calm, very patient teachers or counselors, let people at the program know this so that they can match her up with the right staff members.
- Look for ways to support the program. Small gestures, like bringing in popsicles on a hot day or volunteering to run a booth at the summer carnival, will let staff and other families know how much you appreciate their hard work. You may also be able to lend your support through fund-raising activities in your community.
- Thank everyone who worked to make your child's summer a success. Thank counselors, staff, and other children for everything they did to help your child. If a staff member was especially helpful, consider writing a letter of thanks and sending a copy to the program director or governing board.

### Resources

*American Camp Association (ACA)* [www.acacamps.org](http://www.acacamps.org). The ACA is the national accrediting organization for camps and provides a wealth of information and resources for campers with and without special needs.

*Internet Special Education Resources (ISER)* [www.iser.com](http://www.iser.com). The ISER is a nationwide directory of professionals, organizations, and schools that serve the learning disabilities and special education communities. It helps parents and caregivers find local special education professionals to help with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder assessment, therapy, advocacy, critical teen issues, and other special needs.

*Kids Camps.com*

[www.kidscamps.com](http://www.kidscamps.com). This online directory of camps all over the U.S. includes listings of camps for children with special needs.

*Written in collaboration with the Parent Training and Information Center at the Federation for Children with Special Needs (www.fcsn.org), a non-profit organization committed to listening to and learning from families and encouraging full participation in community life by all people, especially those with disabilities. © 2006 Ceridian Corporation. All rights reserved.*