

HELLO MUTHA, HELLO FATHA THE FAMILY GROOVE'S GUIDE TO SUMMER CAMP

When it comes to summer camp, it's either the best of times or the worst of times, depending on variables like the sun index, a child's swimming proficiency and the temperament of her fellow campers. But no matter which end of the backpack you're zipping, the summer camp experience is an opportunity for enormous growth.

The thought of finding a good, clean, safe camp may give you the feeling in the pit of your stomach akin to sending your child on a trip with no map. You may wonder if they exist at all, or if the movies paint an only slightly exaggerated picture of reality. If you've ever seen the Bill Murray comedy, *Meatballs* or any other similar summer camp disaster movies, you may want to bag the entire idea. But don't assume the worst, take heart. There is undoubtedly an enlightening and nurturing summer adventure awaiting your child and your job is to find it.



as a tradition.

Children ages three to four are now offered a shortened day, beginning at 9 am and ending at 3 pm. For every four campers there is one certified teacher to guide them in a full schedule of amusements: swimming twice a day, drama, nature activities, a music program, fishing, arts and crafts, boating and other sports.

"Children learn at Jeff Lake Camp," says director Sue Rynar. "They may learn a new sport or an art skill, or something about their own inner strengths. We don't call it 'learning' of course, we call it having fun."

At Geshar, kids enjoy special activities like wild water day, a carnival, game shows and concerts. The littlest campers have a rest period in the afternoon to get them through the day of fun that goes from 9 am to 4 pm.

Sending a preschooler to day camp is one thing, but overnight camp is nerve-racking territory for some parents. At Jeff Lake, overnight camp-outs are for second to eighth graders.

At Geshar, overnights are scheduled on Thursdays only and aren't recommended until a child is in third grade, "and even then we have a number of campers that go home early and cannot make it through the night," Scott says. "(For children) younger than that we offer late night stays, but have parents pick them up so they can sleep in their own beds."

Another option is a transitional overnight camp, which would give the child a chance for the sleep away experience for one week at the end of the summer to get them ready for the experience the following year. You may also consider the Monday through Friday sleep away camp where campers return home for the weekends.

To prep a child for spending any part of the summer away from home, visit the camp and get to know about the conditions and facilities. Make sure they have a firm understanding about good hygiene, as well as a respect for authority and peers alike, in terms of privacy and personal space.

"No one knows a child better than his or her parents," adds Scott. "Parents must really get a good understanding of the camp program and assess whether their child is ready for that type of experience."

—Yolanda Navarra Fleming

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For starters, ease the burden of your search by asking people you know for recommendations about where they've sent their kids. A quick trip through cyberspace could guide you to www.KidsCamps.com, an online directory on the job since 1995. You might first consider what your child would most enjoy—nonstop athletics or a more artful experience?

"(Summer camp is) an opportunity for children to be exposed to and learn new things like the outdoors and nature, campfires, songs and activities," says KidsCamps.com publisher, Nancy LaPook Diamond. "There's also the entire spirituality aspect and practical skills, too, like how to make a bed for instance, if they go to overnight camp. Plus, don't forget the just plain fun factor and being able to be a kid."

Be it day or overnight (*Meatballs* notwithstanding), there is a camp for everyone, as you'll recognize in the list of categories on KidsCamps.com. Making the right choice relies heavily on your child's interests and needs. Though the emphasis may be on outdoor fun and nature, many camps provide a healthy balance of activities for a well-rounded experience. Others focus on a special interest like yoga, the performing arts, film, fine arts and the circus, among others. There are also camps with emphasis on sports, military, adventure, academics, religion and special needs.

Scott Lantzman, executive board member of the ACA-NJ (www.acacamps.org) and director of the Geshar Summer Program in Livingston, New Jersey, suggests that children as young as three can benefit from day camp.

"For the working parent, this is a great alternative to day care as many camps offer swimming instruction along with a myriad of other fun and exciting activities," he says, adding the importance of knowing whether or not a camp is accredited by the American Camp Association (ACA).

Jeff Lake Day Camp in Stanhope, New Jersey, still under the same directorship since it opened in 1958, encourages preschoolers to begin their camping experience and come back every summer