

# Day Camps Make a Splash

by Erin Mantz

When Margaret Commisky drops 11-year-old Daniel and 9-year-old Julian off at Congressional Camp in Falls Church this summer, her biggest worries will simply be packing enough sunscreen and extra clothes. She's confident about who will watch her kids, how safe they'll be during activities and how they'll fit in. That's because they've been campers here since they were preschoolers! Experience of summers past and the fact they attend school here during the year do a lot for her comfort level. For other Washington, D.C., area parents, choosing from hundreds of camps and feeling good about the selection is a big question mark and a major challenge.

Your child's age certainly impacts your types of camp concerns. If yours is a preschooler, you may wonder how often the camp cleans the toys. If you have a son entering kindergarten next fall, you may worry about how he'll handle the long camp day. If you have a preteen whose idea of a happy summer is doing arts and crafts in an air-conditioned classroom, you want to be sure he's in the right place. But some parental concerns are universal: Who's watching my kid today? Will he be safe in the sun – and closely supervised during swim time? Will he have, or make, friends? Will he learn new things? Above all, will he have fun? By knowing your child and asking camp directors the right questions, you, too, can breathe easier on the first day.

## Day Camps Dive Headfirst Into Addressing Parents' Concerns

Luckily, many day camp directors have already anticipated these questions and can somewhat alleviate our concerns. As examples, the directors mentioned in this article (and many more) have a staff screening process, strict policies around sunscreen and swimming and icebreaker games guaranteed to make kids laugh.

## Staffing

Understandably, parents may feel nervous not knowing the counselors. Camp consultant Greg Cronin serves on the Board of Directors for the American Camp Association and spent 23 years directing a day camp in Northern Virginia. His advice to parents: "Do your homework. You want a camp director who can clearly communicate the camp philosophy and how he runs the camp. Get details about counselor training, such as ER procedures and expectations for what's counselor-appropriate behavior. Ask what the camp looks for in a counselor, such as certification or a documented ability to adapt to things, and how many are returning from last summer." Cronin also emphasizes the staff-to-camper ratio can be tricky. "Ask what activities the ratio applies to, and think carefully. For instance, if it's 1:10 for the general group activity, is it also 1:10 for horseback riding or archery?" Some parents may be comfortable with that, but some may be disturbed by the image of one adult trying to watch ten kids on horses. "Parents ultimately have to trust the camp will do what the director says they are going to do," Cronin says.

Counselors at Congressional Camp attend mandatory orientation sessions to learn about physical, safety and social issues. They role-play scenarios and learn strategies to handle everything from bullying to making friends. After six years here, Director Jennafer Curran knows everything doesn't happen on the first day, so she continues staff training all summer.

## **The Social Scene**

Day camps take socialization to a whole new level. Campers meet lots of new kids and learn how to interact in settings less formal than school. They work as part of a team on everything from group art projects to obstacle courses. And they are exposed to older campers and teen counselors who can become role models. Greg Clark, director of Mad Science of Washington Camps, sees most kids assimilate quickly when camp begins, but that's not by accident. He's structured the camp and trained his counselors with first-week jitters in mind. Small groups with two counselors enable a divide-and-conquer strategy. In addition, "Our counselors are taught to always be sensitive to any child who may seem isolated," Clark says. "Many have experience running Mad Science after-school programs and attended training on how to run a classroom."

Dana Jones, Alexandria mom of 9-year-old Sarah and 6-year-old Emma, wasn't very worried about the friend factor last summer as her kids began Camp Invention. "I figured they would know at least one kid and if not, I was still comfortable. My older daughter went in knowing someone, but the younger one didn't." They had a great summer. Sarah has already selected a drama day camp for this summer; a small role in a recent play sparked her interest, and Jones will get full details.

## **Sun Safety**

Washington summers stir up heat and humidity that even adults find hard to beat. For kids either too young or too busy to think about dehydration and sunscreen, the challenges come down to camp procedures, parent communication and counselor roles.

At Shaare Tefila Nursery School's Camp Ruach at Temple Emanuel in Kensington, preschool campers are obviously too young to thoroughly tackle sunscreen, so parents slather it on their kids before morning drop-off and sign a waiver so staffers can reapply it. Washington, D.C.'s Lowell School Summer Program makes staying hydrated fun and easy with water games and drinking stations. They encourage kids to drink water from day one and remind them to drink when they go home. Parents send sunscreen and staffers help younger kids apply it.

Since the sun's rays are generally strongest from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. – prime camp time – some camps create a whole structure around sun safety, integrating sunscreen into daily schedules, policies and procedures. Parents of Congressional Camp kids can grant permission for camp staffers to apply sun block on their kids when they fill out an emergency/health history form (required by Virginia state law). The camp asks parents to send campers with sunscreen the first day, when it's then labeled, stored and locked in

special sunscreen lockers. With at least two staffers present and an open-door policy, counselors apply it with gloves – and change gloves between each application. The camp even designates time for sunscreen application on each group's daily schedule.

## **Swimming**

Swim supervision and safety weighs heavily on parents' minds. American Camp Association President Ann Sheets says parents can ask specific questions to better understand their camp's setup. "Where do swim lessons and free play take place? Who are the staff members in, and beside, the pool? Are they trained to teach *and* lifeguard? What first aid is poolside? How do you test campers to determine their placement? How often do you do a head count or buddy check?" The answers may help some parents feel a little better. Those who don't often consider camps that don't have swim programs at all (and there are many to choose from – art, tae kwon do, nature, rock music, gymnastics, ballet, drama, baseball, horseback riding and more).

For parents whose kids are learning to swim or feel afraid of the water, it's important to ask how the camp will handle these sensitive situations. Also find out how, or if, they'll keep you updated on your child's progress. Five-year-olds may not report back too much about their experiences, which can be frustrating for parents.

## **A Summer Well Spent**

A positive camp experience can boost your child's development and self-esteem. Findings from the largest research study of camper outcomes ever conducted in the United States (Lilly Endowment and Philliber Research Associates, 2005) show that camp builds skills necessary to prepare campers for roles as successful adults. In this study of 5,000 families, 96 percent of campers said camp helped them make new friends; 92 percent said people at camp helped them feel good about themselves, and 74 percent said they did things at camp they were afraid to do at first. These changes did not go unnoticed by parents: 70 percent said their children gained self-confidence at camp, and 63 percent said their children continue to participate in some of the new activities they learned at camp.

These potential benefits are one reason why parents should take the time to consider the right day camp for their kids, ask the right questions to alleviate their fears and prepare to send them off. Deb Horan, LCSW-C, a clinical social worker in private psychotherapy practice in Bethesda and mom of twin girls, considers camp one way to encourage a child's independence. "Kids can develop social skills, experience meeting new people and gain confidence in a new venue. Any time you can help a kid gain a sense of mastery over a new situation or thing, you've given him a boost." For one child, it may be learning to swim or riding a horse; for another it may be finally getting that first soccer goal.

Day camp is one of the few remaining places where kids can be kids. As recent studies show the importance of play and parents become more protective about letting kids run down the block, a camp environment offers something extra: a place for kids to take

some risks in a safe manner. Since kids spend less time outdoors these days – only 25 minutes a week for the average 6- to 12-year-old (*Time Magazine*, "The Overscheduled Child Myth," January 19, 2007) – camp is literally a breath of fresh air.

### **Know Your Kid, Ask the Right Questions**

Moms of kids ranging from 4 to 10 all seemed to say this: Know your kid, and ask camps the right questions. "It's a matter of finding the fit that's right for your kid," says mom Lisa Caplan of Potomac, whose 10- and 11-year-old daughters have attended different day camps since preschool. Caplan was reassured by camps who put an adult - in addition to counselors-in-training – in the rooms. She urges parents to get very specific answers to questions. For instance, when it comes to handling the summer heat, "What's the camp's version of a little break from the heat? Does 'indoors' mean an activity in an air-conditioned room? For some kids, sitting under a shade tree doesn't cut it," Caplan says.

What seems to reassure parents is good word-of-mouth from other parents and camps held in private schools or public school facilities. Perhaps the sense of familiarity gives them a level of comfort. Some moms swear by visiting the camp a season ahead of time. Throughout the sessions, many parents appreciate camp-driven communication, such as activity updates on the camp website or camper pictures via e-mail. Summers in the sun don't have to be so worrisome thanks to dedicated camp directors, parents who share recommendations and thoughtful parents who understandably settle for nothing less than stellar.

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## **Play It Safe In The Sun**

"I don't think parents should assume anything," says American Camp Association President Ann Sheets. She recommends parents ask camp directors these questions around sun safety:

- Does the camp provide water (if so, how often?) and/or can parents send drinks?
- Do staffers remind kids to drink to stay hydrated?
- Should parents send sunscreen each day, or just the first day because the counselor will keep it there?
- Will the camp counselors, nurse, etc., put sunscreen on campers? If not, will they remind kids to reapply?

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## **Additional Resources**

Affording Day Camp: [www.campparents.org/affording\\_camp.php](http://www.campparents.org/affording_camp.php).

Healthy Kids: [www.campparents.org/healthykids.php](http://www.campparents.org/healthykids.php).

*Washington Parent* Camp Guide: In this issue and at [www.washingtonparent.com](http://www.washingtonparent.com).

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## Consider Your Day Camp Choices!

When it comes to summer day camp, area families are lucky to have hundreds to choose from (Check them out in the *Washington Parent* Camp Guide in this issue and at [www.washingtonparent.com](http://www.washingtonparent.com).) The metro area offers a good example of the boom in day camps. According to the American Camp Association, since the 1980s, the number of day camps has risen 90 percent across the country.