

By Michele Decoteau | March 1, 2107

## The No-Worry Way to Try Overnight Camp

Summer camp evokes thoughts of long hot days, swimming with new friends, and silly songs, but for some parents it's one more to-do to fit into an already busy summer schedule. For others, sleeping away from home at an overnight camp may be a source of anxiety for the child, parent, or both. And summer camp, no matter where it is offered, is a considerable expense.

Given those factors, many camps are now offering shorter sessions, designed to introduce more children to the joys of camp.

"Short camp experiences are an excellent gateway to the camp programs," says Mary Strom, from Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts. "It is an outdoor progression. Everyone starts in a different place. When I was a girl, I was ready to camp for two or three weeks, but not everyone starts there. We have a program for girls in Kindergarten through third grade, where they go to day camp and have one night where they do a campfire and go home. Then in fourth grade, they may choose to do a single overnight if they are ready, and this is all part of being in regular day camp. We do have a half-week option at our resident camps, too. Campers arrive on Sunday and leave on Wednesday, so they get the full experience of resident camp in a shorter time."

"Our sampler of camp is a stepping stone to a two-week stay," says Ryan Reed, director of YMCA Camp Takokah, in Richmond, N.H. "And for us, the sample camp experience is a week long. It usually takes campers a day or two to adjust and get their bearings before they thrive."

"Our mini-camp experience is three days and two nights," adds Matt Cornish, director of Camp Washington, in Lakeside, Conn. "We usually have 20 to 30 campers and a full staff of eight to ten, so the ratios are great. We stay together as one group building one little community."

Short stays at camp have many of the same benefits of longer sessions, creating life-long memories. Mini sessions fit into schedules for busy families with children who have summer school or sports schedules that are already quite full. Add in family vacations, and a short summer camp might be the best option, especially if a camper is nervous about staying away from home.

"The ideal short-week camper is a kid who loves to explore and is inquisitive by nature," Cornish says. "They naturally want to explore. They may also have anxiety about what it means to be away from home. We focus on creating relationships camper to camper and staff to camper. This helps them stay connected and talk about their worries."

“Most of the staff are pretty young, 18 to 24,” Girl Scouts’ Strom says. “They are all trained ahead of time to work with homesick campers. Often they will talk about their own experiences of leaving home and being at camp with campers who are homesick or anxious. Usually by campfire in the evening, even nervous campers are back on track.”

“After staying for the short camp week,” Reed says, “about 90% of the campers are excited and want to stay longer. When they do come back — and most do — their adjustment period is faster. They know the rules, they know the staff, and they know the vocabulary.”

Every camp has their own lingo and rituals setting them apart from schools and home. Some camps have songs or chants at meals and others may have odd names for facilities.

“Our camp calls the bathrooms the Twins,” Reed chuckles. “The camp is 100 years old and we have two sites on the camp, one for boys and one for girls. When they first built the camp, there were two exactly matching bathrooms that everyone called the Twins. They have been rebuilt and now don’t match exactly, but the name stuck.” Knowing the camp vocabulary and rituals helps campers adjust back to camp quickly at the beginning of a session.

If you or your camper is concerned about being away from home, call the camp ahead of time. Starting in February or March, most have some staff available who can talk with parents about their concerns.

“If you are unsure, call,” Strom advises. “Staff are happy to talk to parents about what to expect and how to determine what camp experience your daughter is ready for.”

In addition, many camps are engaging in social media, not for the campers, but for parents. Some camps will post photos from the week on special blogs or Facebook, so parents can see what is happening and how much fun their campers are having.

Expense is not a small concern for many parents, especially if a child is in more than one camp or has siblings who also want to attend. “We never want to turn away a camper for financial reasons,” Camp Takokah’s Reed says. “We have robust financial assistance for campers, including discounts and scholarships.”

The benefits of any length of camp can be seen in kids long after the final closing ceremony.

“Going to camp allows girls to learn and grow in a different environment,” Strom says. “They are away from their parents, friends, and school. They are away from electronics, as well. You learn life skills at camp that will make it easier to adjust to college. You will know how to make friends, and you can try on different personality traits. You can make mistakes that no one from home sees and no one remembers. Even if you come back to the same camp the next year, it will be with different girls.”

“We focus on cultivating relationships that help kids embrace what community means,” Cornish adds. “Our goal is for campers to leave in better shape than they arrived. And it is that sense of community and togetherness that they carry beyond the walls of the camp.”