



Choosing the Right Summer Camp for a Chronically Ill Child

By Jessica Leigh Johnson

SPRING IS HERE, the school year is winding down and summer is right around the corner. As usual, I'm more excited than my kids about summer vacation. As a stay-at-home mom, I look forward to three glorious months of spending all day every day with my four children. What could be better?

But if previous summer breaks are any indication of how this one will go, by the third day, I'll have heard the words "I'm bored" one too many times from one too many children, and I'll be ready to send them back to school — but I won't be able to. Not until September.

Thank goodness for baseball, swimming

lessons and 4-H. Anything to keep them busy. Of course, there's also summer camp. Six days and five nights of nonstop, kid-oriented amusement — provided by someone else. Where do I sign them up?

Because three of my kids have a primary immunodeficiency, sending them off to summer camp for a week isn't a minor decision. Many factors come into play. But there are ways to ensure parents like me choose the right camp that will meet their child's physical, educational and entertainment needs, while providing Mom and Dad with the confidence that their child is safe and healthy while away from home.

Here are some things to consider when researching summer camps for a child with a chronic health condition:

Whether to attend a traditional camp or special-needs camp. What is the difference, and which type of camp would best meet the child's needs? Traditional camps offer a wide variety of activities, opportunities for campers to experience new things and exposure to other campers and staff. But, there are some camps that offer limited activities geared toward special-needs campers' abilities with trained and knowledgeable staff with expertise to understand these children's varying challenges, and a supportive and fun atmosphere to share with others.¹ One drawback is that special-needs camps do not exist in every state. A list of camps geared toward children with a number of health conditions and/or disabilities can be viewed at the Federation for Children with Special Needs website at www.fcsn.org/camps or in the article "Summer Camp Checklists" in the April-May 2014 edition of *IG Living* at www.IGLiving.com/magazine/archive.html.

Distance from home. How far away is too far for campers with chronic health issues? While there may be more varied experiences and opportunities





farther from home (like swimming in an ocean or skiing in the mountains), staying somewhat local has its advantages, especially if a child becomes ill. The closer the camp is to home, the faster a child can get to an emergency room in a medical emergency and then follow up with the child's regular doctor. Attending a local camp also makes it easier to check out the camp facilities ahead of time and meet with the staff and counselors.²

Are staff members trained and experienced?

While most camp counselors are fun and enthusiastic teenagers working a summer job, well-trained adults might be more equipped and level-headed when dealing with a health crisis.³ When selecting a camp, be sure the staff members are able to make needed accommodations for a child with special health concerns and that they are willing to work with parents so that they feel comfortable with the arrangement. Determining the level of training and experience of camp staff can put parents' minds at ease when leaving their child in the care of strangers.

What is the ratio of staff members to kids?

A child will receive more individual attention in a program with one adult for every five campers than in a program with one adult for every 15.³ For a child with a chronic illness, a closer adult-to-camper ratio will ensure changes in health don't go unnoticed.

Are there medical professionals on-site?

For a child with a chronic illness, attending a camp with a nurse on-staff is a must. Parents should call the camp several weeks ahead of time and ask to talk to the nurse. And, they should find out how and when medications are dispensed. For example, if a child needs to take medication before bed, will the nurse still be there? If not, other arrangements must be made. If a child's medication needs to be refrigerated, there should be a designated, safe storage

area for it.³ Parents should be sure that several of the camp staff — not just the nurse — are trained to respond to medical emergencies such as seizures or severe allergic reactions to food or insect bites. Calling a child's doctor several weeks ahead of time is also recommended to find out what therapies or procedures could be skipped or postponed for the length of camp, or what alternatives could be used (for example, using an acapella several times a day in place of compression vest treatments for those with chronic lung conditions).

How will parents communicate with staff members and their child during camp?

If a child will be attending a daytime-only program, parents may have opportunities to speak with counselors at drop-off and pick-up times. For overnight camp, parents need to ask if staff members will be readily available by phone or email.³ Also, it's important to find out how often they will be able to speak with their child. Some camps have strict guidelines when it comes to campers contacting their parents. While this policy helps campers stay focused on their activities, it can be scary for parents and a child with chronic illness. It is important to figure out ahead of time how to get information about a child's status. It's OK to request that the camp director, nurse or a child's counselor call with updates. Exceptions to the rules can usually be made for chronically ill children, provided there is a plan in place ahead of time.

What are the sleeping and eating arrangements? If overnight camp is being considered and sharing a room with multiple campers poses a threat to a child's well-being, ask if arrangements could be made to have a separate and possibly adjoining room so that the child can feel included, while not sharing sleeping quarters with a lot of other

children. If a child requires a special diet, make sure the camp can provide it. If not, ask if any special foods/meals can be brought to camp with that child and prepared for him or her by the kitchen staff.

Depending upon the specific health needs of a particular child, an overnight camp may be out of the question. In a situation like this, parents can look to their local school district, YMCA or parks and recreation department, which are likely to offer many daytime-only programs for kids according to their specific interests and abilities. Sports camps, art camps and outdoor nature discovery camps are among the many programs offered to children in many communities across the country.

No matter what camp parents choose, the opportunity to spend a few days away from home with other children is an experience that a chronically ill child need not miss out on. Camp is a great opportunity to take a break from doctor appointments and therapy sessions, and a time to enjoy just being a kid. More likely than not, the week will go by without incident. If something should go wrong, having a plan in place for such an occurrence will eliminate confusion and anxiety for parents, staff and the child. The good news for parents is, if all goes well at summer camp, most camps offer winter programs as well! ■

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