



Off to Summer Camp?

Information and Encouragement for Parents

AADigest Exclusive by Sandi Busch

Spring has yet to arrive... so why are we talking about summer camp for kids with ASD? Because you'll need plenty of time to find a camp and then prepare your child for this important experience. But also because camps are already accepting applications and time is running out.

Whether you've made the decision to send your child with autism or Asperger's to summer camp, or you're still unsure – possibly torn between pros, cons, or where to begin – this article will help you through the process. Four camp directors shared their expertise, several parents offered advice from their camp experience, and all that information is combined here to give you tips and information to ensure a successful camp experience.



Opposite page: Campers enjoy the natural beauty of the many Blue Ridge Mountain streams while learning team building skills at Talisman.

Left: Ethan returns from a triumphant conquest of the Camp Akeela climbing wall.

Below: Talisman campers cool down and have fun in the summer sun with a 40' tarp water slide.



Before You Begin...

Consider these tips from the parents and camp directors to get started:

- Know what you want; determine your goals. Many parents use summer camp primarily as an opportunity for their child to be away from home, socialize and build self-confidence. Others have a more specific goal, such as a therapeutic environment, academics, or a camp specializing in sports, arts, computers and other interests.
- Perform an honest assessment. Decide whether *you and your child* are ready for camp. This step is just as – and sometimes more – difficult for parents.
- Gather information. If you're having a hard time making a decision, finish reading this article, target a few camps you like and talk to the camp directors. This will give you a sense about whether that camp is a good fit and the directors will help you work through concerns to make a decision.
- Prepare a list of questions. Don't count on remembering everything you want to ask the camp director. Make a very thorough list covering every concern.

Finding a Camp

Talk with other parents, ask your local autism service providers, and check with your town's YMCA. Do a Google search for "autism summer camps *yourcity*" to obtain a list of local camps. Visit these online organizations that offer directories and information:

- **American Camp Association (acacamps.org).** Online camp search according to age, location, day versus resident, cost, state/region, preferred length, and special needs.
- **National Camp Association (summercamp.org).** Follow the link to CampQuest in their resources section.
- **Autism-Society.org.** Check with your local ASA chapter – many operate summer camps.
- **AutismSpeaks.org.** Go to Family Services, click on "use the resource guide," search by state, and look under "services" to find lists of camps in that state.
- **EasterSeals.com.** Includes a directory of nationwide Easter Seals camps, or you may call your local Easter Seals for more information.
- **VerySpecialCamps.com.** Directory of special needs camps sorted by state.
- **KidsCamps.com.** In addition to lists of special needs camps, you'll also find

camps for academics, adventure, arts, teens, special interests, as well as religious and holiday camps.

- **MySummerCamps.com.** More lists of camps for special needs, family camps, and a variety of categories.



Above: Campers and staff enjoy an evening activity at Camp Akeela.



Left: Gavin and Zoe became best friends during their stay at Camp Lakey Gap.



Right: Machenzie stops during a group hike to use his visual support at a sensory station at Camp Lakey Gap.

Photo credit: Erin Brethauer

important for parents to trust the camp staff. Also ask if they do anything to facilitate ongoing communication between campers throughout the year. Camp Akeela fosters a sense of community through newsletters containing updates about individual campers all year long.

8. **Homesickness.** How do they deal with homesickness? At Talisman Camps, they encourage the children to write home, expressing how homesick they are. One mother said she was worried when she received a letter saying, "I hate camp. I'm 100% homesick." But with each subsequent letter, her child's rating of how homesick he was improved, creating a great visual tool for both parents and campers to see how well they were adjusting.
9. **Medical personnel.** Who oversees medication management? Do they have a nurse available 24/7? What are their procedures in case of an emergency?
10. **Autism support.** What specific supports do they provide? For example, at Dragonfly Forest, counselors use a whiteboard at each activity to prepare the kids by writing down the rules, what will happen, and what to say if they need a break. The counselors also carry a backpack with schedules, timers, paper/pen and a common high interest and/or soothing activity.
11. **Behavior management.** How do they manage difficult behaviors? What happens when a child has a meltdown? Ask how they'll deal with specific challenges faced by your child. When do they call parents?
12. **Daily schedule.** What is a typical daily plan? Is it tailored for the child's interests and needs? Is it flexible? Look for a structure that allows children to do activities at their own pace rather than being forced to keep up with the group.
13. **Breaks and downtime.** How do they allow for breaks? Are they built into the schedule? Do they have a quiet place or sensory room? Are procedures in place to allow a child to

What to Look For in a Camp

You can count on this advice because it comes straight from experienced professionals managing camps for kids on the spectrum. Sylvia Van Meerton (Dragonfly Forest), Linda Tatsapaugh (Talisman Camps), Debbie Sasson (Camp Akeela), and Elsa Berndt (Camp Lakey Gap) generously offered some great information about what to look for in a summer camp. The parents added 100% agreement with these recommendations:

1. **Size of camp.** Most camps specializing in ASD have fewer campers at each session, however you may also want to ask about size as it relates to how many campers bunk together or the number of kids in group activities.
2. **Ratio of campers to counselors.** Special needs camps typically have ratios of 1:1 to 1:4 compared to regular camps that have 1:20+. Is there enough staff to allow individual attention to campers whenever necessary?
3. **Accreditation.** Is the camp accredited by the American Camp Association? This is a good indicator of overall quality.
4. **References.** Will they put you in touch with another parent whose

spectrum child has attended the camp?

5. **Application form.** This should be extensive so parents provide comprehensive information. This allows staff to get to know the family and the child – what causes meltdowns, fears, when to give cues or warnings. It also builds parents' confidence in the camp's ability to manage their child.
6. **Staff training and background.** How much *autism-specific* training is provided? By whom? This is a deal breaker because you must be confident that camp counselors understand autism and how to manage each child's needs. At Camp Lakey Gap, counselors receive eight days of training provided by experts from TEACCH and the Autism Society of North Carolina, and they interact with local special needs kids for experience.
7. **Communication.** Are phone calls from parents welcome? Do staff members regularly call home? Can parents talk to their child? Some camps find that conversations between campers and parents seldom help homesickness; other camps leave it to the parents' discretion. This is another reason why it's

opt-out of an activity when needed? Do they teach campers how to express the need to opt-out?

14. **Activities.** Does the camp offer something your child will be interested in? Are there enough choices and different types of activities? In addition to summer activities like swimming and hiking, are there other less typical choices like cooking or wood shop?
15. **Special diets.** Can the kitchen accommodate your child's special dietary needs? Who will monitor the child's diet if he can't/doesn't himself?
16. **Overall environment.** This includes the physical and philosophical environment. Does the camp fit your child's unique needs? What is their overall approach for dealing with autism?

Trust is one of the most important components. Parents should trust their instincts and must trust camp staff. Do you sense an atmosphere of acceptance and genuine joy? Do you have confidence in the training and experience of camp personnel? How do you feel the first time you contact the camp director? Do you sense the director truly understands your child's individual challenges? A camp director's attitude will reflect the overall camp environment. More than one person suggested that if you don't trust the camp director, walk away.

How to Prepare for Camp

After you choose the camp and apply, here's what the parents and camp directors suggested to help you prepare:

- **Tour the camp.** Meet the staff. Take photos to use as visual references for your child. If possible, take your child with you so she gets a sense of the environment, where she'll eat, the location of the bathroom, etc.
- **Connect with the camp.** Encourage your child to email the camp with questions. (Ask the camp director if this is ok.) If possible, introduce bunkmates ahead of time through email or in person at an open house.

- **Never change medications** right before camp. Ditto on starting new therapies, supplements, etc.
- **Write a social story for rules and schedules.** Ask the director for a sample daily schedule and their list of rules. Create a story about what a day at camp will be like and another one to teach what rules to expect.
- **Practice skills.** Do these only if it will not increase your child's anxiety! Ask what daily living activities the campers do and have your child practice them. Arrange for him to spend the night away from home with a friend or family member.
- **Pack comfort items.** Send bedding, a stuffed animal or other favorite item. Create a booklet of photos to ease homesickness.
- **Care packages and letters.** Do these before your child leaves for camp so they're ready to mail. Put a note for each day in the suitcase. Always be positive ... "we love you" not "we miss you."

Anticipate the Unexpected

Thanks to some inside info from the four parents, here are important issues that are sometimes overlooked.

1. **Don't underestimate peripheral costs.** While some/many camps don't require any extra gear other than good walking shoes, Patricia warns that sometimes the costs for items can add up quickly if you don't already have them. Examples include extra clothing, flashlights, labels, cot-sized sheets, sleeping bag, sports equipment, and transportation costs.
2. **Transition back home.** Ray reminds us that children often feel extreme sadness when camp ends, making the transition home a difficult one. Have activities planned rather than assuming downtime will be needed after a busy time at camp. Create a welcome home celebration.
3. **Prepare your child gradually.** Create a plan to introduce camp slowly. Melissa used Week 1 to introduce the general concept of camp, Week 2 they visited

the camp's website, Week 3 she talked about a friend's experience at camp, and then in Week 4 they toured the camp.

4. **Be flexible and set time aside.** Our fourth parent, Debbie, said they planned for her son to ride the camp bus, but he was extremely anxious and wouldn't get on the bus. They quickly changed plans and drove him to camp, resulting in a smooth, positive transition. Luckily, they had planned time away from work during camp for just that sort of unexpected twist.

Top Tip: DO IT!!

No matter how anxious your child might be the first time he or she goes to camp, everyone agrees that within a few days, a routine is established, campers are happily engaged with activities, and children learn to rely on someone other than mom and dad. In the end, virtually all the campers have a great time and self-confidence blossoms. The camp experience is highly recommended! Have faith, plan carefully, and believe your child can do it! 📌



Read more online! Visit our Subscriber Extras page to read more about going off to camp, get personal insight from parents who have been there/done that, and print our checklist, which summarizes all the steps here plus adds some additional tips to keep you organized.

References

- Camp Akeela (campaakeela.com). Specializing in Asperger's Syndrome, non-verbal learning disabilities; also offers programs for older teens and a family camp.
- Camp Lakey Gap (christmount.org/camplakeygap/). Provides camp sessions for anyone on the autism spectrum, including programs for adults and families.
- Dragonfly Forest (dragonflyforest.org). Camp programs with accessible activities for children across the spectrum.
- Talisman Camps (talismancamps.com). Offering academic and summer programs for children with ADHD, Asperger's Syndrome and high-functioning autism.