



Considering an Overnight Camp Program for your Child on the Autism Spectrum?

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The initial thought of sending your child with Autism Spectrum Disorder to an overnight camp may send chills down your spine. In your imagination your child could become homesick or hurt, have difficulty sleeping in a strange bed, be forced to endure teasing by peers, or be misunderstood by staff due to communication difficulties. After some calm reflection, however, you may alternatively envision that a successful camp experience could potentially create some incredible lifelong memories for your child. Time spent at an overnight camp might also lay the groundwork for future positive life experiences by providing countless opportunities for physical, sensory, cognitive and social/communicative growth. (Of course, a side benefit for the family might also be some badly needed respite time.)

Even though you may objectively recognize the benefits of sending your child to an overnight camp, the prospect of finding the right camp and actually sending him away for an extended period may still seem tremendously daunting. For that matter, you may even be contemplating whether your child is ready for the overnight camp experience. The following tips will help you make a decision about whether a particular camp is right for your child and help you prepare him, the camp staff and even yourself for the adventure. Setting the stage for a positive experience will involve a number of components. They include a child-specific evaluation, an assessment of potential camps, and comprehensive emotional, physical, and informational preparation.

Evaluating Your Child's "Camp-Readiness"

Since each child develops at his/her own pace, it is impossible to pinpoint the precise age when one is ready to attend an overnight camp. Since you know your child best, your own intuition around your child's demeanor and capabilities is likely your best guide. Additionally, you may also wish to ask yourself the following:

1. Has my child successfully stayed overnight away from home while family members were present (i.e., in a motel on vacation or at a relative's house)?
2. Has my child ever successfully stayed somewhere overnight without me or my spouse being present?
3. How does my child feel/behave when separated from family members?
4. How does he cope with new experiences? Does preparation for a new experience help with his coping ability?
5. Has he been exposed to any positive or negative information/myths about overnight camping from schoolmates, relatives, or neighbors – and if so, has he been influenced by them? Has he been exposed to media that paint the camp experience in a positive light? (Because various media tend to incorporate exaggeration or absurdity in order to enhance entertainment value, they may not always frame a given experience positively, thereby potentially raising your child's anxiety about going to camp). Has my child expressed any concerns about the experience? Is he receptive to the idea of going to camp?
6. Has my child ever been to a day camp? Has he visited a fellow family-member at an overnight camp on visiting day?
7. Is he intellectually mature enough at this time to be away for an extended period without parent support? Would a day-program be more suitable as a first time camp experience? Would one night rather than four nights away from home offer a better first experience?

8. Would any typical camp activities or social situations pose an extreme challenge or be a source of stress for my child? For example, would engaging in sensory-based craft activities, eating camp food, or getting dressed in a common area make my child very uncomfortable? If so, would additional maturity and time minimize the problem or would this be a persistent issue that will just have to be addressed?

If you are still uncertain about your child's readiness for camp, you may wish to arrange an overnight test-run experience with a relative or neighbor and see how he fares. Even if you are not 100% certain that your child is ready for overnight camp, remember that our children often surprise us. We may think that our children may not yet be emotionally capable of handling a given experience, but it may actually be us, the parents, who are not quite ready to view our children as competent individuals. While the decision to send your child to camp for the first time certainly is not an easy one, you might feel more secure after you have researched camp options and have selected an appropriate program that will meet your child's needs.

Researching Various Camps

Whether via online searches, networking with fellow parents and professionals or availing the resources of your local library or rehabilitation agencies, information about disability focused or integrated camps should be easily accessible. The type of camp that is right for your child depends on the matching of his or her needs with the stated purpose of the camp program and the level of support, understanding, and skills offered by the program staff.

What type of camp? One camp option is a program that centers on a type of disability such as autism spectrum disorder or on multiple special needs. From a social perspective, meeting friends who share your child's disability may not only be a source of comfort and support, but may also enable him to learn novel strategies and perspectives around the challenges presented by his diagnosis. By the same token, lifelong friendships can also be kindled in an integrated camp setting but typical activities may or may not be adapted for special needs. Depending on your child's degree of emotional and physical independence, you will need to decide which type of camp represents the best option at this point in his life, keeping in mind that in the future your collective goals may be different. Cost, funding support, and distance from home are also variable factors which may change from year to year.

When evaluating camp programs, you may also wish to consider the following:

1. What is the reputation of the camp within the disability community and within the local/ regional community? What is the camp's track record in terms of being able to address my child's specific disability?
2. What is the ratio of full/part-time staff to campers and what are their educational/professional backgrounds? Are staff ratios different for nighttime hours, and if so, do I feel comfortable with the level of supervision/support offered to campers? To what extent is staff supervised? Are criminal background checks performed on everyone prior to employment? Are all employees certified in first-aid and water rescue?
3. To what extent is staff trained prior to the start of camp? For example, are they trained to use visual or other supports to help campers with communication challenges understand scheduling information, steps in an activity or opportunities to make choices?
4. How many children will be enrolled in the camp and with what types/severity of disabilities? Will the ratio be adequate or adjusted if several children need significant support? Does the camp try to have children with a range of support needs? Does the camp accept children who have behavioral issues or emotional problems? This is a consideration if your child is easily upset by confrontations, loud outbursts, vulgar language, or aggressive behavior. Conversely, if your child has emotional or behavioral problems, is it best for him to be part of an enclave of children with similar problems or a minority member of a mixed group?

5. What does the general daily schedule look like? What types of activities does the camp offer and are there choices around them? If a child prefers to watch, is this acceptable? If a child is overwhelmed from a sensory perspective, can he spend some time in a quiet area?
6. Are children offered choices at mealtime? Does the camp accommodate special dietary needs? It is important to ensure that your child will be able to get enough caloric intake to support his increased activity level during his time spent at camp.
7. Are campers separated by gender and/or age for instructional, recreational, and daily living activities?
8. What are children expected to bring to camp? Are specific items not allowed in camp i.e., such as electronic games? (Your child will need to know what favorite things may not be available but he or she can be reassured that he can still enjoy life at camp.)
9. Does the camp allow phone calls or email to/from my child? Will staff call or email updates about my child's status?

Emotional, Physical, and Informational Preparation for Camp

Once you select an appropriate camp for your child, the final step in paving the way for a positive experience is comprehensive emotional, physical, and informational preparation. Although discussed separately, these three areas are very much intertwined.

How far in advance a parent communicates to a child that he is going to an overnight camp is an individual matter. Some children can deal with knowing months in advance. These children will enjoy lots of preparation via books, calendar countdowns to "camp day," a visit to the camp, watching promotional footage and/or participation in shopping, packing and so forth. Others will worry too much if they know anything too far in advance. Various social stories about different aspects of camping might be helpful; a single social story, on the other hand, may be too vague or too limited in focus, or contain too many ideas which may only contribute to confusion and anxiety about the experience.

Although you may still be grappling with second thoughts or concerns about letting go of your son or daughter, it is crucial not to transmit those feelings to your child but to be encouraging instead. A child should be reassured that Mom and Dad will miss him but the emphasis should really be on the fact that his readiness to go to camp signifies increased maturity and an ability to learn to do things independently. As you may wish to explain, he already does this at school. What's different about camp is that he will be "living" there for a while – sleeping, showering, dressing and eating away from home while doing other fun activities throughout the day.

Reassure your child that the staff is aware of his special needs and will be accommodating and sensitive to them. Your child may benefit from knowing about what types of activities may occur but be sure to underscore that you don't know exactly when and even if they will all happen. Explain that plans and schedules may change because of the weather or for some other special reason; everything is not as tightly scheduled as it is at school. While sometimes there may be unexpected changes or surprise activities, this is OK, because that's what happens at camp. Underline that everyone will have to be flexible and deal with changes, even if they don't like change or may not get to do their favorite activity. (Even if the camp furnishes a daily schedule, it is best to frame the schedule as tentative rather than absolute. It is better to have your child expect changes than to be locked into relying on a rigid schedule that may be difficult to maintain due to weather conditions or other factors.)

Depending upon your child's level of cognitive functioning, he may find comfort and security in taking along a family photo and seeing where his own picture will be at home while he is gone. You may also wish to equip him with a notebook for journaling and a disposable camera to take some photos of favored activities. (Photos can be revisited and when shared, will re-kindle pleasant memories.)

Although emotional preparation largely depends on adequate physical preparation, the latter is clearly the more straightforward of the two components. In addition to following the generic packing list provided by most camps, you may also wish to include a familiar transitional object or two that represents a source of comfort for your child, be it a favorite pillow or stuffed animal. If you think it will be of benefit to your child, have him assist with the selection of clothing, purchasing of toiletries and the eventual packing. Use a checklist to account for all items going to the camp since you would like these same items to be repacked at the end of camp for the return trip home.

Information sharing with the staff will need to be as detailed as circumstances require for your child. Written advice is optimal as it can be referred to as often as needed and shared with appropriate personnel. All medications should be clearly identified and a separate sheet of paper should clearly outline each one's purpose, required dosage and designated times for administration. Be sure to provide supplementary instructions about any allergies or sensitivities, especially if the camp medical form offers limited writing space.

Be specific about the level of assistance or monitoring that your child requires around daily living skills such as dressing and undressing, toileting, teeth-brushing, showering and eating. Offer insight about your child's coordination, sensory issues, language comprehension, ability to express himself, learning style, social skills, attention span, curiosity, safety issues, or any other information you deem significant.

Share all information relating to behavioral concerns and how these are best managed. Some behavioral problems may never occur because your child is so busy and engaged. Others may occur because your child is tired, over-stimulated, or confused. Identify the signs of an imminent meltdown so that staff may intervene proactively in order to prevent it. For example, increased vocalizations and pacing might signify that your child is becoming increasingly agitated. In order to circumvent a meltdown, the staff might need to help him relax, move him to a more quiet setting or direct him to an activity that is less frustrating or more favored. Without advance guidance, however, staff might erroneously insist that your child stop pacing and be quiet and be unaware that this approach will adversely impact him.

Summary

Camping can represent a positive growth experience for both a child and his/her parents. Your child can learn to be more flexible and to enjoy experiences without extensive family support. As a parent you will learn to temporarily let go while experiencing pride about your child's growing emotional maturation. There is also a side-benefit for family members, i.e., a well deserved respite from certain responsibilities.

Resource

Vicker, B. (2007). Sharing information about your child with autism spectrum disorder: What do respite or alternative caregivers need to know? Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

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