

South Jersey MOM (Wenonah,NJ)

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"Camp Goals Mainstream or special needs camp Considerations Meet the Leadership Team"

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Choosing a Camp for Your Child with Special Needs

If you are thinking about camp for your child with special needs, there are many things to consider that go beyond the typical camp search. Below are some tips to help you navigate your camp search and help you find the camp that will be the best fit for your child.

First thing is to consider what you are hoping your child will gain from the camp experience such as recreation, a respite, new friendships and to gain independence, explains Maureen Brennan, Director of Camp Jaycee, a residential summer camp for children and adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities in Pennsylvania. Starting with this question will help to guide your search.

Kim Minerley, Director of **Camp Merry Heart**, a program of **Easterseals New Jersey** for people of all ages and all types of disabilities and special needs, says your camp choices often depends on the severity of a child's needs and abilities. There are many variables in deciding on a camp for children with special needs. When looking at whether a child will be more successful at a mainstream or special needs camp, begin by reviewing the child's support plan at school and speaking to teachers and other professionals. Also make sure to research several camps. Some camps, special needs or otherwise, have programs that can accommodate and support certain needs and abilities, and some don't.

Minerley feels the most important considerations should be about safety. It's important to ask some key questions such as: Is the camp accredited by the American Camp Association? Are there background checks on all staff? Is the staff experienced and how are they trained? Who is on the medical team and are they available at all hours? How are medications/treatments delivered? What are the protocols if a child is injured or ill? Are special foods available for campers with restricted, special or therapeutic diets? How will my child's special needs be managed at camp? What is the Counselor to Camper ratio? As for leisure, look for camps that include a variety of activities which promote positive reinforcement and attention. Ask what a typical week look like and the camp activities that are offered.

A camp will certainly interview the family and child, but it is also important for the family to interview the camp leadership team, suggests Minerley. Make sure you are prepared with your questions and you are happy with the answers. A good rapport with the camp leadership is important and having an open relationship will allow the leadership team as well as yourself to communicate about anything. Meeting the camp leadership will also give you a good feel for the camp culture.

Touring Camp

When possible, visit the camp. It makes the initial drop-off easier for your child when they are familiar with the camp facilities, says Brennan. Minerley adds, If it's not possible to visit, it's important to check out the website or any you tube videos available. Also, speak with as many staff as possible including the director, nurse, program specialists and counselors.

Be honest

Most camps will want to know as much as possible about a child in their care. Some parents are reluctant to share too much information with camp staff for fear the child will not be accepted or there might be a particular stigma associated with the child, says Minerley. It is imperative, for the

success of the child, that parents share all pertinent information having to do with behaviors, interventions and redirection. You do not want your child to attend a camp that is not prepared or does not have all the tools necessary to care for your child's needs.

Audience provided by Nielsen/NetRatings

Highlights: NJ, NEW JERSEY, Camp Merry Heart, Easterseals New Jersey