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choosing a Summer Overnight Camp

How to get the most for your money.

BY JENNIFER PROE

Even in a down economy, overnight camp is one luxury families will probably keep in the budget. The reason?

Summer camp is really not the luxury it was thought to be in earlier years, says Jeff Solomon, executive director of the National Camp Association. The truth is, with the increase in dual-income families, summer camp has become much more of a necessity.

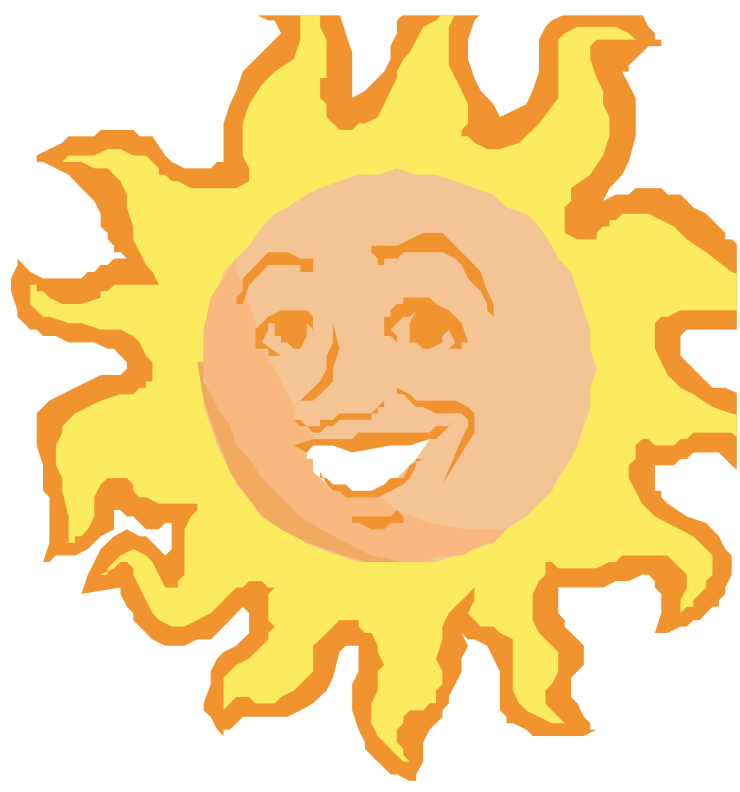
Solomon predicts that camps will probably fill to capacity, but perhaps not as quickly as usual as parents take more time to search for the best value.

The best way to find those values is to check the camp websites frequently. A camp with slow enrollment may extend its early-bird discount beyond the date printed in its brochure. Many camps offer sibling discounts. Last but not least, it doesn't hurt to ask the camp director for financial assistance, such as an installment plan. The worst that can happen is he or she might say no, says Solomon.

While slower enrollment may be good news for the procrastinators among us, Solomon urges parents not to be complacent. He recommends parents do the research now to select their top two or three choices, and check availability for your child's age group. If space is limited, it may be necessary to put down a deposit right away. Deposits can range from \$100 to more than \$1,000, so be sure to know the refund policy up front.

To make sure families get the best value out of their investment, Solomon suggests doing a little research to get the right fit. The NCA web site, summercamp.org, offers a resource to match campers with the right overnight camp. Parents fill out an online questionnaire and receive a follow-up call from a camp advisor to help them select the top two or three camps that fit the family's needs. The bottom line, according to Solomon: Don't assume that camp costs will be prohibitive. There are camps in all different price ranges, and early planning is the key to budgeting.





Good Advice

For the Kagan family, a summer session at Camp Wise in Chardon is already on the books. Abby, nine, and older sister Emma, 12, are eager to repeat their experience from last summer, when they tried overnight camp for the first time.

Their mother, Ruth Mardell, was worried about taking the plunge at first. She thought the girls might be too homesick to have fun. Their father, Jerry Kagan, had a different perspective. I had gone to camp when I was 12 or 13 and really enjoyed it. I thought it would be a good experience for them to learn to negotiate things successfully without us.

After attending the camp's information night, which included a presentation from the camp director and a slideshow, all four of them were on board with the idea. About a month before going, they had a chance to tour the camp. Supervisors also called to go over any questions or concerns they might have.

By the time the girls went, we were all feeling pretty comfortable with the situation, says Ruth. But when we got their first letters home, we were positively ecstatic, because they were having such a fabulous time. We knew we had made the right decision.

The girls had such a good time, in fact, that the Kagans immediately signed up again for this summer. Their advice to other families considering overnight camp for the first time: Don't choose too short a session, says Ruth. They really need some time to settle in.

Abby says, Even though I was a little scared at first, I made friends with people I wouldn't have met, and got to do lots of fun things like horseback riding, water trampolines, and tubing. Emma offers a few practical tips: Bring tape. You need it for everything. And a clip-on fan is also a good idea.