

# Summer Camp GUIDE





# Arts, Music and Theater Camps

If you have a kid who is constantly dancing, making up plays, singing or painting, summer camp can be the time to really let them shine.

Arts-focused summer camps offer more than building skills. These programs create spaces where creativity is encouraged, self-expression is celebrated and confidence grows naturally through exploration and collaboration.

Whether a child dreams of the spotlight or simply enjoys making art, creative camps can have lasting benefits that extend well beyond the summer months.

## CREATIVITY AS A CONFIDENCE BUILDER

Arts, music and theater camps emphasize process over perfection. Campers are encouraged to experiment, take risks and try new forms of expression without the pressure of grades or competition. This environment helps children develop confidence in their ideas and abilities.

Performing arts camps, in particular, help children practice speaking up and being seen. Rehearsals, improvisation exercises and group performances teach campers how to project their voice, communicate clearly and trust themselves in front of others. For children who may be shy



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or reserved, these experiences can be especially empowering.

Visual arts and music camps offer similar growth through different avenues. Completing a painting, learning a new instrument or composing a piece of music gives children tangible evidence of their progress. That sense of accomplishment builds self-esteem and reinforces the idea that effort leads to growth.

## LEARNING COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

Creative camps are inherent-

ly social. Theater productions require teamwork, listening and compromise. Music ensembles depend on cooperation and shared rhythm. Art studios often encourage campers to give and receive feedback in supportive ways.

These collaborative experiences teach children how to work with others while still honoring their own ideas. Campers learn to express opinions respectfully, adapt to group goals and support their peers. These skills translate easily to classrooms, friendships and future workplaces.

Arts camps expose children

to different perspectives and creative styles. Seeing how others interpret a role, a melody or a visual theme helps campers appreciate diversity in expression and problem-solving.

## GROWTH THAT EXTENDS BEYOND CAMP

The benefits of creative camps often carry into everyday life. Children who gain confidence on stage may feel more comfortable speaking in class. Those who learn to express emotions through art or music may develop healthier ways to process feelings.

Arts camps foster resilience. Creative work involves revision, practice and occasional disappointment. Learning to accept feedback and keep trying builds perseverance and emotional maturity.

Families choosing arts, music or theater camps should consider a child's interests and comfort level. Some programs focus on skill development, while others emphasize exploration and fun. Asking about class size, performance expectations and daily structure can help match a child with the right experience.



# Choose the Right Camp Length

The word “camp” covers a lot of ground when it comes to summer programs. They come in many formats from half-day programs to multiweek overnight camps.

Each option offers different benefits depending on a child’s age, personality, interests and family needs. Choosing the right length can make camp feel rewarding rather than overwhelming.

## **MATCHING CAMP LENGTH TO AGE AND EXPERIENCE**

Younger children and first-time campers often do best with shorter programs. Half-day camps provide structure and fun without pushing children too far beyond their comfort zones. This format allows children to build confidence, form friendships and return home each day or week feeling successful.

Full-day camps can be a good next step for elementary-age children who are ready for longer stretches of activity and social interaction. They offer more time for immersive experiences while still maintaining the familiarity of home in the evenings.

Older children and teens may benefit from multiweek or overnight camps, especially



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if they have prior camp experience. Longer programs allow for deeper friendships, skill development and a stronger sense of independence. For some campers, the extended time helps them fully settle in and feel part of a community.

## **CONSIDERING TEMPERAMENT AND COMFORT LEVEL**

A child’s temperament plays a significant role in determining the right camp length. Children who adapt easily to new situations may thrive in

longer sessions, while those who need more time to warm up may prefer shorter commitments.

Consider how your child handles transitions, fatigue and downtime. High-energy children may enjoy full days packed with activities, while others may benefit from shorter programs with breaks built in. Another factor is how a child responds to being away from caregivers. Starting with a shorter camp can help ease anxiety and provide a positive first experience that builds confidence for

future summers.

## **BALANCING CAMP WITH FAMILY SCHEDULES**

Logistics matter, too. Work schedules, transportation and family vacations can influence which camp length makes sense. Half-day camps may require midday pickups, while full-day and multiweek camps can simplify scheduling for working families.

Some families choose to mix and match formats, combining a few short camps with a longer session later in the summer. This approach allows

children to explore different interests while maintaining balance.

When evaluating camp options, ask about flexibility, such as extended care or the ability to add weeks if a child wants to stay longer.

There is no single right answer when it comes to camp length. The best choice is one that aligns with a child’s readiness, interests and family needs. With thoughtful planning, camp can become a positive and enriching part of summer, regardless of how long it lasts.



# Preparing First-Time Campers

For children heading to camp for the first time, excitement often shares space with uncertainty.

New routines, unfamiliar faces and time away from caregivers can feel overwhelming, even when a child is eager to go. Preparing first-time campers emotionally can help turn nervous energy into confidence and set the stage for a positive experience.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends some practical steps such as making sure campers have swim lessons, talking to camp directors about special health needs, getting a child a sports physical, and not changing medications right before camp.

## BUILDING EMOTIONAL READINESS

Emotional readiness starts with honest conversation. Talking about what camp will be like helps children form realistic expectations. Describe a typical day, from arrival to activities to pick-up or bedtime, and invite questions. Acknowledging worries without dismissing them helps children feel heard and supported.

Normalize mixed emotions. Let children know it is common to feel both excited and nervous about new experiences. Sharing age-appropriate stories about your own first



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experiences away from home can help children feel less alone.

Reading books or watching videos about camp can provide visual context and spark excitement. Visiting the camp beforehand, if possible, or attending orientation events can further reduce uncertainty by making the environment feel familiar.

## ENCOURAGING INDEPENDENCE BEFORE CAMP

Confidence grows when children practice independence in small, manageable ways. Simple tasks such as packing a backpack, choosing clothes or managing personal belongings help children feel capable and prepared.

Allowing children to make

choices builds decision-making skills. Let them help select camp activities, clothing or comfort items to bring along. These small choices reinforce a sense of control in a new setting. Practicing separation ahead of time can help. Short playdates, day programs or overnight stays with trusted friends or relatives allow children to experience time away

from home in a low-pressure environment.

## CONFIDENCE-BUILDING ON THE FIRST DAY

The first day of camp sets the tone. A calm and positive goodbye helps children transition more easily. Keeping farewells brief and upbeat sends a message of trust and reassurance. Lingering goodbyes can unintentionally heighten anxiety.

Encourage children to focus on one small goal, such as meeting a new friend or trying one activity. Achievable goals can make the day feel manageable and rewarding.

Caregivers need to project confidence. Children often take emotional cues from adults. Expressing belief in their ability to handle camp challenges reinforces self-assurance.

If communication is allowed during camp, setting expectations ahead of time helps prevent misunderstandings. Let children know when they will hear from home and reassure them that camp staff are there to help if they feel unsure.

Every child adjusts at their own pace. Some settle in immediately, while others need a little time. With preparation, patience and encouragement, first-time campers often discover they are more capable than they realized.

That sense of accomplishment can become one of the most lasting benefits of the camp experience.



# Camps for All Abilities

Summer camp can be a powerful experience for children, offering friendship, independence and a sense of belonging.

For families of children with disabilities, sensory sensitivities or medical needs, finding the right camp may take additional planning. Inclusive camps are designed to ensure that every child has access to meaningful, safe and enriching summer experiences.

Many programs go beyond basic accommodations. They focus on creating environments where campers of all abilities can participate fully, build confidence and feel valued for who they are.

There are several resources for finding inclusive camps. Websites such as VerySpecial-Camps.com list camps by state or province and by special need. Needs are broken into categories such as neurodiversity and learning, chronic health conditions, mobility and physical support, sensory and communication, emotional wellbeing and social support, and then “other” camps — sibling camps, therapeutic riding, transition programs, burn survivors and online camps.

## WHAT MAKES A CAMP INCLUSIVE

Inclusive camps vary widely, but most share a



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commitment to thoughtful planning and trained staff. Some camps integrate children with disabilities into traditional camp programs with added support, while others offer specialized sessions tailored to specific needs such as autism, mobility challenges, visual impairment or chronic medical conditions.

Counselors may receive instruction in behavior support, adaptive recreation,

medical protocols or sensory regulation techniques. Lower camper-to-staff ratios often allow for more individualized attention and flexibility.

Physical accessibility is another important consideration. Inclusive camps may feature wheelchair-accessible paths, adaptive sports equipment, quiet spaces for sensory breaks and clearly structured daily schedules to help campers feel grounded and secure.

Medical support can also

play a role. Camps serving children with diabetes, epilepsy, severe allergies or other health concerns often have on-site medical staff and clear emergency plans. This allows campers to participate in activities while families feel confident about safety.

## SUPPORTING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Inclusion is about connection. Many inclusive camps emphasize social skills

development, peer understanding and community-building.

Activities are often designed to encourage cooperation rather than competition, helping campers form friendships at their own pace.

For children with sensory sensitivities, camps may offer flexible participation options, visual schedules and predictable routines. These supports can reduce anxiety and help campers stay engaged throughout the day. Inclusive camps benefit children without disabilities by fostering empathy, patience and respect for differences. Shared experiences help all campers learn inclusion is a strength, not a limitation.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT PROGRAM

If you are considering inclusive camps, ask detailed questions during the selection process. Topics may include staff training, communication practices, behavior support strategies and how the camp adapts activities to meet different needs.

Discuss your child’s specific strengths, challenges and triggers in advance. Open communication allows camp staff to prepare appropriate supports and set realistic expectations. Some families may choose to start with shorter sessions or day camps before transitioning to longer programs. This gradual approach can help children build confidence and comfort over time.



# Supporting Homesick Campers

For many children, summer camp brings excitement, independence and new friendships. For others, especially first-time campers, it can trigger homesickness.

Feeling anxious about being away from familiar routines and loved ones is a normal part of growing up, and with the right preparation and support, most children adjust quickly and go on to enjoy their experience.

Understanding how to ease worries before camp and respond thoughtfully once camp begins can make a meaningful difference for both children and caregivers.

## PREPARING BEFORE CAMP BEGINS

The foundation for a positive camp experience often starts weeks before the first day. Talking openly about camp helps children know what to expect and gives them space to express concerns. Ask what they are excited about as well as what feels uncertain, and listen without minimizing their feelings.

Practicing short periods of independence can help build confidence. Sleepovers with relatives, time at day camps or even structured playdates away from home can gently prepare children for being in a new environment. Packing



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familiar items can provide comfort during moments of transition. A favorite pillow, stuffed animal or photo can help children feel connected to home without distracting from camp activities. Families should follow camp guidelines on personal items to

ensure comfort objects are appropriate and manageable.

It is helpful to set expectations around communication. Let children know when and how they will be able to call or write home. Clear expectations can reduce anxiety and prevent disappointment if

contact is limited.

## SUPPORTING THE ADJUSTMENT AT CAMP

Once camp begins, consistency and encouragement matter. Many camps train staff to recognize signs of homesickness and respond

with empathy and structure. Engaging campers in activities, encouraging peer connections and maintaining predictable routines can help redirect attention and build comfort.

Families play a role during this stage as well. If communication is allowed, keeping messages upbeat and reassuring can help children focus on the present. While it may be tempting to express how much they are missed, emphasizing confidence in their ability to adapt often works better.

Early homesickness does not mean camp is failing. In many cases, feelings peak within the first few days and ease as children settle in. Trusting the camp's experience and giving children time to adjust can prevent unnecessary stress.

## WHEN TO STEP IN

While mild homesickness is common, persistent distress may signal the need for additional support. If a child struggles to eat, sleep or participate in activities over several days, caregivers should communicate with camp staff to explore strategies together.

Choosing a camp with strong communication policies and trained counselors can provide reassurance before issues arise. When children feel supported and understood, homesickness often becomes a temporary hurdle rather than a lasting barrier.



# The Role of Play

Play is often seen as a break from learning, but research and experience consistently show play is part of growth.

Through play, children develop social skills, emotional resilience, creativity and problem-solving abilities that shape how they learn and interact with the world.

In a time when schedules are increasingly packed and screen time is hard to avoid, opportunities for unstructured play are more valuable than ever. Summer camps can provide this kind of meaningful play, especially when they balance structure with freedom and encourage time outdoors.

## WHY UNSTRUCTURED PLAY MATTERS

Unstructured play allows children to make choices, negotiate rules and follow their curiosity without constant direction from adults. This type of play helps build independence and confidence, as children learn to navigate challenges on their own or with peers.

When children invent games, build forts or create imaginary worlds, they practice flexible thinking and creativity. They develop emotional skills, such as managing frustration, taking turns and resolving conflicts. These experiences support cognitive



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growth in ways that cannot be replicated through worksheets or screens.

The Scientific American reported free play is critical to children becoming well-adjusted adults — and cited a study of convicted killers that found the majority never played as a child. In 2005, it was found children's free-play activity time dropped by a quarter between 1981 and 1997. It's only gotten worse since then. Experts say kids need at least an hour a day outdoors and most U.S. kids today get only four to seven minutes a day outdoors. A 2018 study indicated only 30% of children get as much play time as their parents.

As schools were pushed to

offer more instructional time as a way to raise test scores, they began reducing play time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2025 up to 40% school districts have reduced or eliminated recess since the early 2000s. The National Institutes of Health say only 10 states mandate a minimum amount of recess time for elementary students.

Summer camp can help mitigate some of these losses.

## THE BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY

Outdoor play supports physical health through movement, balance and coordination. It encourages children to engage their

senses and connect with their environment.

Nature-based play can improve focus and attention while reducing anxiety. Whether children are climbing, running, observing insects or simply lying in the grass, outdoor experiences offer opportunities for discovery that feel natural rather than forced.

Dr. Katie Lockwood of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia wrote, "Outdoor play helps children grow socially, helping them to develop healthy ways of forming friendships, responding to physical interaction and using their imaginations to entertain each other. It helps them solve problems, build relationships

within their peer group and gain a respect for nature."

## IMAGINATION AS A LEARNING TOOL

Imaginative play helps children make sense of the world. Pretending allows them to explore roles, express emotions and test ideas in a safe setting. Through storytelling, role-playing and creative games, children practice communication and empathy.

Camps that encourage imagination may offer open-ended art projects, dramatic play, storytelling circles or loosely guided games that leave room for interpretation. These experiences nurture creativity without focusing on performance or outcomes.



# Policies and Safety Standards

Choosing a summer camp involves more than selecting activities and schedules.

Safety policies and operational standards create an environment where children can learn, explore and thrive. Understanding what to look for in camp policies can help families make informed decisions and feel confident about their choice.

American Summer Camps says many camps offer an orientation session for campers at the beginning of their stay to teach them safety policies, rules and protocols for camp. Families can ask for this information before the camp begins.



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## STAFF TRAINING AND QUALIFICATIONS

Well-trained staff are the foundation of a safe camp experience. Families should ask how counselors are selected and what training they receive before camp begins. This may include first aid and CPR certification, behavior management strategies, child development education and emergency response procedures.

Many camps provide ongoing training throughout the summer to address new situations or reinforce best practices. Experience working with children of similar ages or needs is another important

factor, particularly for camps serving younger children or those with medical or developmental considerations.

Background checks are standard at reputable camps. Don't hesitate to ask about screening processes and supervision expectations for all staff and volunteers.

## SUPERVISION AND CAMPER RATIOS

Supervision ratios help ensure children receive appropriate attention and support. Lower camper-to-staff ratios allow counselors to monitor safety more closely and respond quickly when issues arise. Ratios often vary by age

group, with younger campers typically requiring more supervision.

Ask how supervision works during transitions, free time and high-energy activities such as swimming or sports. Understanding when campers are directly supervised and how accountability is maintained can provide additional peace of mind.

Ask how camps manage group sizes and whether children remain with the same counselors or rotate among staff throughout the day.

## EMERGENCY PLANS AND COMMUNICATION

Preparedness is a key

indicator of a well-run camp. Camps should have clear emergency plans for medical incidents, severe weather, facility issues and other unexpected situations. On-site medical staff or access to nearby medical care can be especially important for longer or overnight programs. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends asking about how health care is delivered at camp, what are the swimming requirements, what the protocol is for applying and reapplying sunscreen and asking about vaccination requirements.

Communication policies are equally important. Find out

how the camp will notify you in the event of an emergency or illness and who to contact with questions or concerns.

## ACCREDITATION AND OVERSIGHT

Many camps seek accreditation from recognized organizations that evaluate safety practices, staffing, programming and facilities. While accreditation is not required for all camps, it often reflects a commitment to higher standards and regular review. The American Camp Association accredits camps that meet a high level of health and safety standards.