

# Destination Summer Camp

**TEN MILLION CHILDREN** across the nation attend camp every year, and 5 million of those attend an American Camp Association (ACA) accredited camp, according to the ACA.

## Benefits of Camp

Overnight camps are often cited for helping children garner independence and confidence. But why is this so important? And more importantly, is it true?

“Making decisions about what activities they will participate in, forming interests and building relationships away from parents,” are some of the positives of camp cited by

Ginger Pauley, the spokesperson for ACA. “[A] new setting allows many children to ‘be who they want to be’ at camp without expectation of a preconceived role.”

“I think that the more a child attends day camp and overnight camp and is put in a position where he or she has to socialize with others and try new things, the more confident and independent the child becomes,” Lila Baltman, a mother of three who sends her children to both overnight and day camp, says. “Children need to prove to themselves that they can successfully make it on their own—away from mom and dad.

## QUICK PACKING TIPS

Quick! You have one hour to pack for an overnight summer camp for your children – what do you pack? **Lila Baltman shares:** “If I had one hour to pack, I would include the following: a good-quality sleeping bag, pillow, blanket, jeans, t-shirts and shorts, sweatshirts, one warm jacket, two bathing suits, socks and underwear, pajamas, two pairs of sneakers, one pair of water shoes, a rain poncho, towels and a washcloth, stationary to write some letters home, a flashlight, water bottle, toiletries, a hair brush, toothbrush, sunscreen and insect repellent.” » “Also, a definite must-have for every camper—especially a boy—is an old-fashioned deck of playing cards. Every summer I always send my sons to overnight camp with a deck of cards and they tell me that it’s a ‘huge hit’ with the other boys in their bunk.”

break from the digital world and a sustained period without reliance on home support systems; fostering greater independence and resiliency in participants; and allowing time for skill development in both activity and social areas, cementing learning and instilling confidence among campers, which spills over into other areas of their lives, Pauley says.

“The best thing that both day camps and overnight camps have in common is the plain, old ‘fun factor,’” Baltman says. “Both types of camps give children an excellent chance to learn new activities, make new friends and become a little more independent, but the main priority at both day camps and overnight camps is making sure that kids are having a great deal of fun!”

Homesickness doesn’t have to be a bad thing either. Missing home and family can trigger the “absence makes the heart grow fonder” cliché, and help children to appreciate their home life. For Baltman specifically, she found going to camp herself as a child helped her not only hone skills in a specific area, but also helped her gain independence from her twin sister and develop her own identity. While homesickness is a real possibility of overnight camp, parents should consider the positives of this emotion.

## Beyond the Obvious

Some of the benefits of camp are discussed at length, and whether your children attend camp or not, you’ve most likely heard the statistics about how summer camp, resident or day, can help children gain self-confidence and self-worth as well as build social skills. However, there are also many benefits of camp not as well known. According to Pauley, “young people need high quality relationships with adults—camps represent one of the best opportunities for youth to build relationships with role models outside the family.”

Not only does camp provide a safe environment for children to grow, develop character and learn compassion, it also creates an opportunity to make learning fun and leads to future academic growth, says Pauley. Camp also supplements formal education with a balance of experiential education opportunities, she adds.

Baltman says her own positive experiences at camp inspired her to send her children, but that’s not the only reason

they go back every year. Camp also offers a lot of opportunities for children to try new things that they may not have otherwise shown interest in. “I like them to try new sports and activities and make new friends during the summer,” Baltman says.

But camp doesn’t have to be all about exploring new options. Summer camp can also be used to develop a skill or further explore a hobby.

“If a child knows exactly what he or she wants to pursue, there is nothing wrong with honing in on that one area and focusing on just one camp,” says Jennifer Settles, a mother of three whose two daughters attend Valley Youth Theater camp. “Both my girls love theater and singing, so Valley Youth Theater was a natural choice for the two of them.”

Another benefit of sticking with what you know? Kids who attend the same camp year after year have the opportunity to build stronger bonds with their campmates.

“Long-time friendships have been formed over the summers, and it’s been really wonderful to see some of the same friends year after year,” Settles says.

“I’ve made so many friends at camp, and often times they are the camp ‘regulars,’ returning every year, making it feel almost like a tradition. I’m still close to people I’ve met seven years ago from camp,” says Dorothy Settles, Settles’ daughter.

## The Benefits of Unplugging

In our technological world, there is a definite benefit to “unplugging” for a couple of days or even just a couple of hours. Unplugging can help children get more unstructured playtime outside, cut down on screen time and increase physical activity. Pauley says only 50 percent of children get the recommended 60 minutes of daily exercise. Eighty-five percent of camps report more than an hour of intense activity, 34 percent between three and five hours a day.

“Camp is often the first time many children experience nature! Unplugging from technology is also a great way for kids to get physically active and work on face-to-face, in-person relationship building and social/emotional skills. It is also a time for them to participate in free, unstructured play—which is critical in helping children understand ‘how’ to learn, not just ‘what’ to learn,” Pauley says.

The thought of unplugging from all of their electronics may not sound like fun to kids at first, but Baltman assures that unplugging has its benefits, and children will realize that.

“When [my boys are] away at camp they tell me that they love to play outdoors every day and be out in nature,” Baltman says. “They honestly say that they don’t miss TV, video games, computers, etc. when they’re away at camp. They tell me that they love to go hiking and camping out in the woods. They enjoy ‘hanging out in the bunks with their friends, talking, and playing cards,’ and ‘reading books in the hammocks.’ That’s music to any mother’s ears.”

## Why Day Camp?

Day camps can act as an excellent precursor to overnight camps, helping to prepare children for an extended stay.

“Day camps offer many of the same benefits of residential camps, helping campers gain independence and confidence,” Pauley says. Day camps “can create the foundation needed for successful longer-term experiences away from home... [and] returning home daily can often provide more opportunities for partnership between the camp and parents surrounding the growth and skill building of campers.”

“I do feel that every child should first be introduced to a day camp experience before going away to any overnight camp,” Baltman says. (Pauley notes the majority of overnight camps are open to children ages 9 and up).

Despite the shortened time period, some parents may still struggle with sending their youngest campers away, but Settles says most kids adapt and accept new situations quickly. “I think they mostly thrive with the independence given to them.”

“Like all parents, one of my great challenges is to make sure that each of my three kids has a summer that includes fun, growth, friendships, challenges, some structure and some down time,” Settles says. “Since both my husband and I are at work all day, leaving the kids at home all summer to fend for themselves has never been an option. I learned early-on that day camp is fun and a great way to challenge the kids throughout the long summer, while not breaking the bank and not sending them off to some far away place.” ■