

It's Time to Think About This Summer

More options than ever to sift through

By Victoria Goldman

Despite freezing temperatures and snow days, now is the time to think about firming up your child's summer plans, because if you don't register soon, your child might get left out in the cold.

Most likely, parents who were satisfied with last summer's choice have sent in re-enrollment contracts and deposits. But for the undecided the quest continues, as brochures for camps and hordes of other summer programs fill mailboxes, and savvy parents peruse advertisements and guidebooks for even more summer options.

Parents seeking summer programs often talk to other parents, private advisers and school guidance counselors, as well as to kids who've already gone on trips or experienced various places or programs of interest, better to understand what might work out best.

Optimally, by the end of spring break in March or April at the very latest, summer plans will have been agreed on. Requisite contracts, health forms and checks will have been sent in, and checklists for clothing and equipment dutifully being filled.

Then, relieved that Junior's plans have been settled, parents can make some summer plans of their own — if they haven't already.

Elaine Vipler, a private adviser whose firm, Summer Scope, places kids in a variety of summer programs, notes that today there are so many more options than ever before, especially for teens.

"When I started my business in 1985 the only teen programs were teen tours and C.I.T. [counselor-in-training] programs and a few adventure programs, or teens worked for wages," Vipler says.

"Now," she observes, "parents get so used to their kids' being away, more parents work and they want their kids exposed to a variety of programs."

"So," she adds, "hundreds of programs have cropped up."

And different ones serve different needs, abilities, interests and requirements.

For instance, let's say your kid needs more community-service hours — key for college resumes — and can't find the time during the school year, because of the demands of activities and homework. Organizations such as Habitat for Humanity offer a variety of programs to fill required hours or provide an outlet for altruistic impulses.

Vipler also notices a distinct trend in the greater flexibility and specialization of programs and camps.

"There are more shorter programs, four weeks instead of eight, 'rookie weeks' the

year before, and visiting of camps the year before," explains Vipler.

As for specialization, there are camps and programs that cater to practically everything from rocket science to the performing arts.

As with most things in life, timing is everything.

Older kids, teenagers, tend to look later, usually between January and April.

"But," Vipler cautions for children of all ages, "if you really want every option, start in September or October the year before."

In the end, the biggest hurdle parents face is sorting through all those options and figuring out what exactly will work best.

"Speak to your child before calling, and have in mind what you're looking for," advises Vipler. "And know your kid has to fit in and want to do it."

Here are some dos and don'ts of summer planning.

DO

- Discuss, clarify, even make a list of your child's interests, needs and expectations.

- Be focused.

- Think about what's best for your child, not you. One example Vipler recounts is a family in which the father was a former football player, but the son was artistic and had no interest in sports. She had to explain to this family that a competitive sports camp

wasn't going to make an athlete of the child or raise his self-esteem. Rather, Vipler suggested an artsy environment, where the child's talents could be cultivated and he'd feel good about himself.

- Visit camps the summer

before to get a good sense of the place.

- Encourage sleepovers away from home for first-time campers.

- Begin gathering information early to minimize stress and maximize options.

Take notes when visiting or watching videos of different camps or programs. "It's like looking at houses," says Vipler. "You will forget more as you look at more."

DON'TS

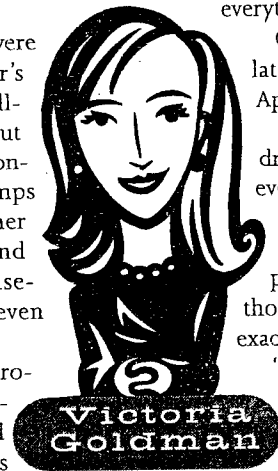
- Send your child to a camp just because the kid's cousins or a friend's kids go there.

- Choose a camp solely because you or your spouse went there.

- Re-enroll if you don't really like the director.

- Send your child away because you want some childfree time. That often backfires, and kids are home within a week or two. Although some kids will stick the summer out, they more than likely won't want to go back or to a similar program until they are much older, if at all. Also, in many cases tuition is nonrefundable.

- Be late to visiting day, or linger when it ends.



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