

## RESPIRE TIP



### CHOOSING A SUMMER CAMP PROGRAM

You have decided that a summer camp program is best for your child this summer. There may be several options open to you, e.g., a local community/recreation day camp, a disability-specific special needs camp, or a sleep-away camp outside of your community. What are the pros and cons of each?

#### Community Camp

##### Pros:

- Chance for your child to meet 'typical' peers in a relaxed setting
- Usually close to home
- Your child with special needs and his/her siblings could attend the same camp
- Your child becomes better known in your community

##### Cons:

- Concerns about accessibility and appropriateness of equipment, location and activities
- Camp staff may not have the right skills or training to support your child as well as required
- Potential for teasing is there if the staff are not trained in inclusion and your child's disability
- Your child may be ignored, neglected or under-stimulated

#### Special Needs Camp (sleep away or day camp)

##### Pros:

- Program, materials and environment are geared to your child's special needs.
- Child can meet and play with peers living with similar challenges
- Parents have a chance to meet and network with other parents of special needs children
- Staff will be trained to work with your child and his/her special needs

**Cons:**

- Camp may not be in your community so you may have to travel
- Camp fees are usually more expensive
- Lack of experience in counselors can be challenging to the program

Once you have looked for and found a promising program, you will need to ask some questions to be certain this is a good fit for your family member.

**Questions to ask before making a final decision:**

1. What is the camp philosophy? Is it a recreation program or is there learning/therapy for your child involved?
2. What is the inclusion policy?
3. What is the educational background of the director and staff? Do they have special needs training and experience?
4. What is the daily schedule?
5. What is the adult-child ratio? If my child needs one-on-one support, can that be provided? If the camp cannot provide it, could I provide a worker? Would the camp pay for a worker I provide or would I be expected to pay the worker directly?
6. Is lunch provided or does my child bring his/her own? Is there a refrigerator and stove available for campers' meals? How is mealtime supervision handled?
7. Do staff members have lifeguard skills? What rules are there around swimming?
8. My child needs to have medication during the day. How are medications stored? What is the plan for giving my child his medications?
9. How long are the camp sessions?
10. What is the cost? Are there any financial aid programs to help with fees? Can my child try camp for a week or do you have to sign up for an entire session?
11. What is the camper age range?
12. What age are the counselors? What training do they receive?
13. What is the turnover rate of staff and campers? A 50% return rate is ok – higher return rates are considered to be better.
14. Is the camp location accessible?
15. Who has first aid training?
16. How are behavioural problems handled? What training is given to staff?
17. Is the camp equipped to handle my child's special needs?
18. What are the camp hours? Are there extended hours?

There may be more questions you can think of to ask. Be sure to write down all your questions and don't be afraid to ask them. You know your child best and you are his or her best advocate.

In order to have a positive camp experience it is important to be honest with the camp staff about your child and his/her needs. If the staff fully understands the needs, they can tell you if they are able and equipped to include your child in the program.

Finally, you have your child registered in a program and first day of camp is here. Pack up the backpack; send any treats and equipment needed for the day. Although you and your child may feel anxious about starting at camp, it is best to say good bye with a smile and a wave. If you seem calm and happy, your child will feel more reassured about the experience.

Happy Camping!

*This Respite Tip has been brought to you by the Nova Scotia Partnership on Respite, Family Health, and Well-Being. Information on the Respite Partnership and this and other Respite Tips can be found at: <http://disability.novascotia.ca/content/nova-scotia-respite-partnership>*

*Respite, WE deserve it!*



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