

# Too young for camp?

Not anymore! Camps gear programs to kids under 5

By SHARON MACGREGOR

According to the American Camp Association, more kids as young as age 6 are going off to overnight camp. To some of us, that may seem a bit young to be away from Mom and Dad for more than a day or two. After all, a 6-year-old is still relatively new to the school routine. But, children who may have had limited experience with a structured, large group setting away from home, can still thoroughly enjoy camp. With a little bit of planning, selecting the right program, and your overall support of the experience, you can make your child's camp experience a wonderful success.

Believe it or not, your child's reaction to camp depends a great deal on your reaction or expectation of camp. Your child could pick up on your fears or reservations and end up hating camp before he even gets there.

"Parents must recognize camp as a positive experience," says John Estis of Camp Redwood in Walden. "The child will not be able to express a readiness. The parent must be the one who is ready."

If you hesitate, or think your young child is not ready, then it is reasonable to expect neither of you will be happy with camp. With a little help from you, your young child may ease into the first real away-from-home experience.

"If you feel your child may have trouble being away from you, include a photograph of yourself in the child's backpack and they can take it out if they are missing you," recommends Irene Rumsey, YMCA camp director for Middletown and Monticello.



photo Mill St. Loft

## How to prepare for young child for camp

Is your child ready for camp? These tips can help.

- Tell your child it is exciting to meet new people, have new experiences and try new things.
- A young camper may think he will not like a certain activity before he starts. Advise your child to stick with it and help him realize he doesn't have to like everything the same amount.
- Tour the camp together, meet the advisors and counselors together. Attend an open house if possible.
- If you do not think your child will be comfortable at a sleep away camp, start with a day camp or half-day session.
- Remain positive. If you do not believe camp is going to be a great experience for your child, it probably will not be.
- Give your child a picture of you to keep in her backpack.

Knowing your child's readiness for camp is also important to selecting the right program. Maybe your child really isn't ready for overnight camp. Look into half-day or full-day programs instead. In the Hudson Valley, the options are vast enough to allow a comfortable fit for both parent and young camper.

Day camp is probably the most common choice for a first camp experience and may be run by your town, church, the YMCA or a private establishment such as a school or day care. The schedule may be available in half or full days and either offer a wide range of activities to enable children to be exposed to a number of options they may not normally experience, or the camp may focus closely on one particular activity such as baseball or art.

Most camps provide the same activities to all campers regardless of age, but scale them down to a younger child's abilities. "A child as young as five can water-ski," says Estis, "but the experience has to be geared down to their ability level."

Arlene Gould, program coordinator for Mill Street Loft in Poughkeepsie agrees. "The Dutchess Arts Camp, which is available for children as young as four years old, offers the same structure and theme for all ages, but the experience is adjusted by age."

For instance, children have the opportunity to work with practicing professional artists in pottery, mime, magic, voice and dance. Camp culminates with campers sharing their art (masks, kites, weaving, pottery or whatever they have worked on); the presentation may be dramatic, incorporate music or dance.

However, some larger organizations may offer separate programs based on a child's age. The YMCA in Middletown offers a half-day camp specifically designed for

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## YOUNG CAMPERS

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three- to five-year-olds, but the children participate in the same activities as the older children.

The Middletown YMCA offers conventional camp activities such as swimming, but even young campers are separated by ability. Some may require life jackets, while others who are more experienced swimmers only need a flotation device. Children also participate in traditional group games, arts and crafts and scavenger hunt activities that may include easier to understand picture clues.

Young children can benefit from any kind of camp experience. Children receive some of the same benefits a school or day care environment can provide. Socialization skills can improve and self-esteem can soar as a child finds her niche through activities and interaction with other children.

"The social interaction is similar to a school, and allows a child to develop skills and improve self-confidence," says Estis.

When Gould describes a typical day at Mill Street Loft, she explains that children begin their day with the entire group, break away with their peers, gather with the large group for lunch, break away again and end the day with the large group, much in the same way an elementary school classroom may

have children learn in smaller groups within the class.

"If you know where your child may have a weakness, such as standing in line, let the counselors know," Rumsey advises. Any information you can provide in advance will help the staff make camp a positive experience.

Many families who have fallen in love with the camp experience for their child continue the tradition for all siblings. Children tend to be separated by age at a camp, so unless they are twins, your children will likely not see each other very much throughout the day. "If a camp has a high return rate, a child can attend for six years, then become a counselor, and as an adult return as an artist," explains Gould.

When selecting a camp for your young child, the combination of considerations should include: a safe environment, age and skill level appropriate activities, trained staff, and a tolerable length of time for the child to be away from their parent. Visit the camp, check out the website if available, talk to the staff and bring your child along if possible.

Many camps do not offer a refund policy after camp has begun because a space has been reserved for your child. However, camp directors feel their staff and environment have been designed to offer the youngest campers the best experience.

*Sharon MacGregor is a freelance writer and mother of two teens.*

### 5 questions to ask a prospective camp

Before you send your child to any camp, be sure to ask:

1. What experience and training do the counselors have including first aid, CPR and lifeguard?
2. What is the camp discipline policy?
3. What is the counselor to child ratio?
4. What do children actually do during unstructured free time?
5. How often do counselors perform head counts?