

STEP AWAY FROM THE XBOX

Kids today have many options for summer camp. Here's how to make sure you pick the best one for yours.

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When it comes to choice summer activities, camp continues to be part of the quintessential childhood experience. With such a variety of options, however, "camp" today may look a lot different from what you remember.

If you can imagine it, there's likely a camp for it. Have a budding thespian in the family? Try theater camp. An outdoorsy kid? An overnight camp in the mountains awaits.

Social butterflies may thrive at a longer-running day camp, where they can cultivate new friendships and feed their need to share without the pinch of an immediately impending "last day."

Fortunately for you, dear parents and guardians, Colorado Springs and the surrounding areas are packed with a variety of summer camps that will get the kids off the couch, outside, and maybe even learning something.

Whether you pick day camp, a short overnighter or a longer adventure, fun for kids means paperwork for adults. Before you dive in, Andrew VanDerWege of Go West Camps has some helpful advice that's sure to save you some time.

Do your homework

VanDerWege grew up at his parents' resident camp before forging his own career in resident and day camps in Colorado Springs.

He recommends parents select organizations that are certified by the American Camp Association (ACA), a nonprofit network of thousands of camp professionals whose mission is to ensure all camp programming is a high-quality, safe, positive experience for every kid.

"There are over 360 standards an organization must abide by to have the ACA-accredited status," VanDerWege, a longtime ACA volunteer, explains. "If a camp is accredited, you can really be assured that they have a program that takes safety seriously and that they have a real focus on quality programming."

Other questions to consider:

- Does the staff undergo background checks?
 - If the counselors are kids or teens, how are they trained and vetted?
 - How does the camp handle discipline?
 - How will it communicate issues with parents?
 - How does it handle homesickness?
 - Is it licensed by the state of Colorado?
- You can usually find your answers on a camp's website, or simply call and ask.

Day or night?

Camps are generally broken down into either day camps or overnight camps. Depending upon age, maturity level and interests, you can decide whether you want your child to stay close to home or venture off to one of the many overnight camps located in Colorado.

Day camps are an excellent way to keep kiddos active and productive throughout the summer, but still have them around in the evenings

and on weekends. They tend to operate more along the school schedule kids are used to, with adventures and activities throughout the day. They may last as little as a week or as long as most of the summer.

To get the maximum experience for your child, VanDerWege recommends enrolling in sessions that are longer than a mere week.

"Kids can have fun in a one-week camp," he says, "but if you really want them to grow as a person, they need more time."

On the other end of the spectrum, overnight camps can be as short as a night or two away, or can last up to a month.

Unlike the East Coast, which is home to camps that run throughout the summer, Colorado offers little in the way of summer-long sleepaway experiences. There are a few options for month-long programming; the average, however, is one to two weeks.

Traveling away from home offers your child a highly immersive opportunity to develop his or her independence. Overnight camps, especially longer sessions, focus on developing responsibility and autonomy.

Expect a traditional program to include daily chores, minimal or no use of electronics, and a lot of choice in how campers can spend their days.

Home away from home

An issue most parents will face when preparing children for longer overnight camps isn't writing their name in 12 pairs of underwear or trying to find a reasonably priced sleeping bag. It's homesickness, which is said to affect 80 to 90 percent of kids who travel away from home.

Your child's camp counselors have likely seen it all and have a variety of strategies to help a camper who is struggling, but you can also ease the transition.

The simplest way to combat homesickness is communication. Don't be afraid to be honest: Let your child know it's normal to feel a bit sad when activities are slow or at bedtime, when there aren't a lot of distractions.

Take away the surprise of homesickness by working together to create a strategy for those times, such as reading a favorite book, reading letters from home, or re-focusing on favorite activities of the day.

Having a solid plan in place will help your child feel far more confident to manage these feelings when you're not there to help.

Another great way to keep kids motivated and positive is to send them off with letters from home. Create a letter to be opened each day they are gone or when they are feeling homesick.

Be sure to keep the letters cheerful, upbeat and focused on the camp experience. Don't lament how much you miss them or repeatedly point out how soon they will be home. Do tell them you love them and that you can't wait to hear all about the fun experiences they've had.

Another remedy for homesickness is to buddy up with a friend, especially on the first trip away from home. If you know another family considering summer camp, ask if they want to coordinate so your children can attend together. Most camps will accommodate cabin requests (ask first), and a familiar face can go a long way toward easing the blues.

Chances are, kids will experience some degree of homesickness in longer overnight camp sessions. It's normal and it can be managed fairly easily. But if you're worried, it's very important to consider your child's unique personality, maturity level and independence before committing to overnight camp.

If kids struggle to stay through a one-night sleepover with friends or family, sending them to spend a week or longer with strangers in an unfamiliar setting is probably not the best idea.

Grow time

Perhaps the best advice to follow is this: Choose an experience the kiddos can't get at home, filled with new adventures, skills and memories that keep them learning and developing outside of the structured environment they typically encounter in school.

VanDerWege encourages parents to choose a program that really fits a child's individual interests so the camp experience is truly enjoyable.

"You want to get your kid excited about the things they are going to be doing at camp," he says. "Summertime is an opportunity for your kid to grow." 

