

Chapter 1



How this Book Will Help

To get the most out of this book, we recommend that you read it cover-to-cover 6 to 12 months before the camp season. That may seem like a long time ahead, but if you're starting from square one, you'll be researching camps, making a selection, scheduling a physical exam, getting emotionally prepared for the separation, learning how to pack, and finishing dozens of miscellaneous tasks. It's a lot to do, especially when you consider that most day and resident camps fill up their available spots several months before they open. Therefore, it's a good idea to start the process now and register early for the camp you eventually choose.

For those of you pressed for time, this is just the book for you. *The Summer Camp Handbook* is comprehensive and written for parents who want a thorough reference. However, we've also written the book with your busy lifestyle in mind. As an alternative to reading every chapter, go to the table of contents and index to find only the material that's immediately relevant. The book's logical organization will help you pinpoint the information you need now. In addition, most chapters have summaries of key information.

If you are reading this and camp opens in less than six months, fear not. We have arranged the chapters to follow the order most families take as they prepare for camp. That way, you can jump in at any stage of the process. With six months or less to go, you can either read the entire book, to see whether you've forgotten anything, or go directly to the chapters that interest you. There is still time to make wise choices. Your future camper should read the Just for Kids chapter as soon as possible.

If you've already chosen a camp, congratulations! It's not an easy choice, considering all the possibilities. We recommend skimming Parts I and II of the book to see what else you might learn about the camp you chose. Then, parents should read Parts III and IV more closely, and kids should read Chapter 15. These parts contain important discussions about the emotional and physical preparation that helps so much before camp starts. You'll also find tips on packing and preparing for a smooth opening day.

If your child is already at camp, skim Part III and carefully read Part IV. There, you'll find a lot of helpful information on helping your child get the most out of camp. For parents whose child is at overnight camp, we've even included sample letters to help you write supportive correspondence. You'll also find suggestions for what to include in a care package and how to prepare for a smooth closing day. You might also read Chapter 15, where you'll find helpful tips to share with your child in your next letter.

CHOOSE WISELY

More than seven million kids attend overnight camp each year in the United States. When they're grown up, those kids will tell romantic stories of how camp made them a better person. They'll explain how the overnight camp experience enhanced their social and physical skills, how it cultivated their leadership abilities, and how it bolstered their independence. Adults who reminisce about their camps see them as wholesome islands in today's stormy social

sea. For kids, though, camp is less about values and more about fun and friends.



Almost all young people love camp. However, if you choose the wrong camp, at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons, or without adequate preparation, then it could be a miserable experience. With more than 6,300 overnight camps and nearly 21,000 day camps in the United States, picking one could seem impossible. This book will help you make all the right choices about when to go, where to go, how to get ready, and most of all how to make sure that camp



is an unforgettable, positive experience. We'll give you valuable camp information you can't find anywhere else, plus experienced answers to the toughest questions you have about camp.

Although we focus on overnight camp, the principles of selection and preparation apply equally well to day camps. All high quality camps contain the magic combination of community living, away from home, in a beautiful natural setting, with a recreational premise. Research by the American Camp Association, led in part by the two of us, has validated 150 years of conventional wisdom. This unique quartet of ingredients accelerates development in social skills, sense of adventure, physical and thinking skills, self-reliance, and self-esteem. Camp is an investment in your child's development that pays large and immediate dividends.



Meet the Authors

The Authors of 'The Summer Camp Handbook' are:

Jon Malinowski

I grew up in Vermont and started day camp there when I was about seven. I don't remember much about the experience except the bus rides to camp, feeling nervous about changing in the pool locker room, and singing songs. I must have enjoyed it though, because I graduated to overnight camp at age nine. I remember a few things from those first two summers at overnight camp: taking the swim check, getting sick, and witnessing raids on younger cabins by older cabins. My parents eventually realized that they could find a higher quality camp.

The next year, we chose a camp where some of my friends went and where my Cub Scout den mother sent her own children. I still remember driving up to my cabin and meeting my first leader, Jim. That summer is filled with wonderful memories and the pleasant realization that all camps are not the same. After four years as a camper there, I was asked to join the leadership. I felt

privileged to be part of such a qualified group of people. After a two-year training program, I became a full-fledged cabin leader and, later, a senior staff member. More than thirty years after my first summer there, I'm still involved with the camp. I've held positions as a senior staff member, a Division Head, Program Director, and board member. This variety has given me a valuable range of experience with campers, cabin leaders, and administrative staff. I see and experience camp from many different angles.

During four years as an undergraduate at Georgetown University and four years in graduate school at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, I spent my summers at camp. In graduate school I was working on a PhD in behavioral geography, so it seemed natural to focus my doctoral dissertation on children's place preferences at overnight camp. This research made me realize that, even during a short stay at camp, children can develop strong ties with camp places, and that children use those places to deal with both the good times and the bad. I am now a professor of geography at a major college, as well as a professional photographer. I have also served on committees of the American Camp Association, trained camp staff and written articles on camping for magazines. My years at camp have been a life-changing journey. Next to my parents, overnight camp is the single most positive thing in my life. As Chris once said, "I've got the best job in the world: I live on a baseball field."

Christopher Thurber

I grew up in Maine and started day camp there at age six. I remember on rainy days we'd play with toys inside and on sunny days we'd go to the beach. I loved it. A couple years later, I switched to a different day camp that employed an incompetent crew who failed to intervene when the "big kids" harassed me. Suddenly, I hated camp. I stopped going.

After a few years in the Cub Scouts, my curiosity about overnight camp grew. *There must be some good camps out there, I thought, but two weeks is a long time to be away from home.* Only after considerable encouragement from one of my best friends did I finally try overnight camp at the age of 12. I fell in love with camp again. My cabin leader was fantastic and I met some really nice kids, including Jon. When my parents came to pick me up, the first words out of my mouth were, "Next summer, I want to come for four weeks!"

At 15, I served as a junior leader, and at 16, a leader-in-training. After my first summer as a full-fledged cabin leader, I wrote all my college application essays about how much camp meant to me. I knew then that I wanted to spend the rest of my life working with kids. I



spent several years as a cabin leader and then served as Division Head and Waterfront Director. With my increased responsibility came more complex leadership issues and more difficult camper problems. Ultimately, these challenges led me to change my major at Harvard from government to psychology and then to pursue my PhD in clinical child psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

As an academic psychologist, I've spent most of my career researching the causes, consequences, and best ways to deal with homesickness. I've published a dozen articles and book chapters on the topic and collaborated with Jon on several studies of children's favorite places at camp. I've also had the privilege of serving on the American Camp Association's research committee and sharing that research with thousands of psychologists and camping professionals across the country. Like every clinical psychologist, I strive to engender positive changes in people's lives. Camp's influence on my personal and professional development is immeasurable, so it feels good to give something back to camp.

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As you can see, we have similar backgrounds in camping and academics. It's no wonder that our friendship has lasted so long. It is sort of funny, though, that it took us so long to think of writing this book. We've been telling each other for years that parents and kids would enjoy camping more if they knew more. Now that research has helped us find solutions to some of the most common questions and problems that parents and kids have concerning selecting, packing, and preparing for camp, families can be much better prepared. By reading *The Summer Camp Handbook*, you can greatly increase the chances that you and your child will choose a camp wisely and then enjoy the whole experience.

We often think back to a particularly humbling moment during the summer of 1985. We were both proud first-year cabin leaders. On the way back to our cabins one afternoon, we came across a teary-eyed boy sitting at the foot of a tall white pine. "Can you help me?" he sobbed, "I'm really homesick." We assured him that we could help and took turns offering him comforting advice, but deep down neither of us was as confident as we sounded. Suddenly, we didn't feel so proud. What could we do, really?

Fortunately, we now know what makes young people homesick and what makes them feel better when it hurts. We also know much more about how kids interact with the environment at camp and what places and activities make them happy. To ensure

your child has the best possible time at camp, we have included all the essentials of wise camp preparation in this book.

CAMP IS ABOUT PEOPLE

You will ask yourself a lot of questions as you read this book and as your family experiences camp. You'll find most of the answers in this book, but no piece of information is more important than this: Camp is about people. Good people make good camps. Remember that.



The first overnight camp in America began way back in 1861. It started when two people—Frederick and Abigail Gunn—camped out with some of their pupils on the shores of Long Island Sound. Believe us, they had a minimal amount of equipment. No air-conditioned indoor tennis courts, no hand-sewn soccer balls, no graphite-epoxy tennis racquets, and no pump-activated, gel-soled sneakers. Nothing fancy...not even any bathrooms. But the kids had a blast because the camp was run by two good people who loved children.



Some Notes on the Terminology and Writing Style in this Book

Overnight. In the camping industry, *sleepaway* or *overnight* camps are called *resident* camps, because children reside there, instead of going home each night as they do at *day camp*. Although some camps also use the term *resident*, this word has other meanings too. Therefore, we use the more specific term, *overnight*. Although most overnight camps happen during the summer, some happen during the winter. To be inclusive, we say *overnight camp* and *day camp*, not *summer camp*.

Staff & Senior Staff. There are a lot of people who work at camp. Collectively, they are called *staff*. Directors, assistant directors, program directors, waterfront directors, and other people who are in charge at camp are called *senior staff*.

Cabins & Cabin Mates. Camps have different names for the different forms of housing in which children live at camp. They could be called *cabins*, *tents*, *teepees*, *bunks*, *dorms*, *huts*, *lodges*, or even *yurts*. We use the traditional word *cabin* to refer to any and all group living facilities at overnight camp. The children who live together in a cabin are called *cabin mates*.

Cabin leader. The person who lives and eats with campers is the *cabin leader*. Although *counselor* is also common, we prefer the specific term *cabin leader* because *counselor* could also mean *psychologist* or *guidance counselor* or even *lawyer*. Plus, a good cabin leader spends much more time leading than counseling.

Instructors. Some camps have staff who work only in certain activity areas, but do not live and eat with the campers. Examples of these staff members include the tennis pro, the riding instructor, and the swimming coach. We refer to these specialized staff members as *instructors*. Many specially trained cabin leaders are also instructors.

Pronouns. We interchange his and her and he and she throughout the book to be fair and to avoid awkward sentences. Unless specifically mentioned, all of the material in this book applies equally to boys and girls.