

Prevention and Care *Your Child's Health at Camp*

By Linda Ebner Erceg, R.N., M.S., P.H.N.

Letting go means different things to families. Growth. Independence. Opportunities. No arena is more challenging for parents than entrusting their child's well-being to others.

We have our medicine cabinets brimming with bright Band-Aids® and children's cold medicines, not to mention the ready hug and kiss when the need arises. So, what's a camp to do?

A look at what camp health professionals are talking about helps parents prepare for a child's camp experience. Linda Ebner Erceg knows campers literally from the inside out, and as a camp nurse and leader in the field of camp nursing, she shares some of her know-how with parents.

The Camp Health Form — What Happens After You “Stick Out Your Tongue”

The camp health form provides the perfect opportunity to assess the overall state of your child's health and growth. Preparation should include parents reflecting on some of the following:

- Growth and development (physical, intellectual, emotional)
- Eating and sleeping habits (changes are important, too)
- Recent illnesses or injuries
- Immunizations (also note travel, especially outside the U.S.)
- Fitness
- Behavior
- Family life adjustment or challenges
- Puberty and other developmental issues

Whether pediatrician or family practitioner, your child's doctor is an active partner sharing a common goal — the health and wellness of your child. And this partnership informs the next partnership you are about to establish — the one with your child's camp.

A thorough exam prior to a camp session allows you to take the necessary steps to communicate fully with the camp's health-care staff. The physical is also a chance to update that very important health history.

Communication is a Two-Way Street

Camp directors and health-care staff are eager to discuss the health concerns and needs of campers. Armed with your own observations and information from your child's health-care provider, you can ask the right questions and provide the information that creates the most positive experience for your child.

Families with children experiencing chronic health problems may occasionally forget to share some of the routine care instructions — second nature to them, but unfamiliar to camp nurses and staff. This also is a major step in assuring that your child will not be marginalized because the staff is unprepared to smoothly integrate medicines or treatments into the camp routine. Have a management plan in place before your child begins camp and determine how the camp will communicate that plan to its staff.

Another area of concern for camp professionals is a child's exposure to health risks from traveling, particularly outside the U.S. Again, sharing this information about travel previous to camp will lead to a more complete picture of your child's health and will strengthen the partnership.

For more tips on health forms and questions to ask a camp director or health professional, visit www.CampParents.org.

Something is Making Me Sneeze — Allergies and Asthma

Children's health profiles are best described as moving targets.

Allergies, both mild and severe, can exhibit themselves for the first time at camp or be exacerbated because exposures at camp vary from those experiences while at home. Parents need to get the assurance from camp staff that they are prepared to address these symptoms if they occur, as well as the procedures they follow.

Camps offer a rich profile of activities for children, and given various health concerns, parents are advised to carefully select a camp for their child with this in mind. Children who have asthma, for example, aren't necessarily a good match for a camp emphasizing scuba diving or rock climbing, while a strong pioneer or crafts program at another camp may be a perfect fit for their child. Parents will want to learn what accommodations camps can make for health issues while at the same time presenting a range of activities appropriate for their camper.

Emotional and Psychological Wellness

For campers with diagnosed psychological challenges or in cases where parents are unsure about a child's behavior, parents need to talk with the child's professional care provider and assess whether the child is a good risk for camp at this stage. Just as a pediatrician needs information about the camp under consideration, so, too, does the child's mental health practitioner. A shorter-stay camp, for example, offering a two-week stay, has a very different skill set profile for campers than one offering a longer-term stay. Day camps offer another option for parents to consider — maintaining a familiar routine at home to balance the challenges of a program filled with new faces and new activities.

Stress Happens — Even at Camp!

Sometimes in our rush for community and togetherness, we forget that contemporary children are often used to solitude, and, may, in fact, need quiet time and space to reflect on their day. Providing a child with a clock radio with headphones or a CD player tucked under a pillow may allow your son or daughter to decompress. Ask the camp director or camp health-care provider about opportunities for private time. Maybe the camp library is the perfect place — or a sheltered outdoor spot away from the fray of games will provide the quiet and restful area that your camper may seek. Talking with your child ahead of time reassures both of you that camp can and does accommodate many different personalities and needs while offering a wealth of activities to share.

Preparing for Group Living

Be consistent. That's one of the most important maxims of parenting. But wait! At camp, we ask children to turn some rules upside down: share bunk beds, equipment, bathrooms, and even talk to strangers. The good news is camp creates the perfect setting to learn these new skills in a supportive environment.

Camp — Designed for Healthy Living

When we think about it, camp practices what parents and health professionals are always preaching: be active, get up off the couch, turn off the TV, stop snacking before meals, listen to others, cooperate, eat a variety of foods, sleep well. It's a nearly invisible set of rules that makes a world of difference. At camp, we believe that enthusiasm for a healthy life is, in the best sense, contagious!

To learn more about camp and child development, please visit the American Camp Association's family-dedicated Web site: www.CampParents.org.

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