

Summer Camp

With the possibility of fun in the sun, friends, and freedom from their parents, it's no mystery why so many children want to attend summer camp. The number of kids heading to summer camp in 2009 is set to hit the 10-million mark -- a number that has remained the same over the past several years, according to the American Camp Association.

Top 5 Tips for Making Summer Camp Affordable

1. **Limiting your search to day camps, rather than a round-the-clock sleepaway, is an easy way to slash spending.**
Fees vary widely, but day camps can cost around \$275 a week, while sleepaways can cost about \$780, according to the ACA.
2. **Pick shorter sessions.**
Many camps offer a menu of programs that run between two and 10 weeks.
3. **Once you settle on a camp, negotiate, negotiate, negotiate.**
Start by talking to the camp director. Every year, camps give away more than \$39 million in scholarships, and 90% offer some form of financial aid, according to ACA. Don't be shy about asking camp directors what type of aid is available. If camps won't (or can't) lower their prices, then see if you can arrange for a payment plan rather than paying everything up front -- which many camps require. You can also see if the camp is willing to let you barter your "volunteer time" for cheaper fees. Another surefire money saver is not participating in the camp's meal program -- instead, packing a bagged lunch can whittle down cost.
4. **Check with your employer.**
Your company may offer flexible spending accounts for dependent care, which typically lets workers set aside up to \$5,000 to cover costs such as child care (including day camp, but not sleepaway camps). Last year, 84% of large companies offered the benefit, according to the business consulting firm Mercer.
5. **Start thinking about next summer.**
It might seem far off, but camps often offer deep discounts to families that sign up a summer in advance. Early enrollment for the following year can begin just a week or two into a session.

There are more than 12,000 sleepaway and day camps in the country, according to ACA, meaning that there are camps to suit every budget. In some cases, nonprofit camps such as the Boys & Girls Club might waive fees for families that can't afford to pay. Churches, synagogues, and social-services groups also offer low-cost or free options.

What Moms Can Do about Summer Camp

It's not uncommon for kids to feel ready for camp before their parents do. Kids might talk about it with you first if they hear about it from friends or classmates. Have them sleep away from home for a few nights or go on a school trip that involves a night away as they show signs that they're ready to be away from their family. Just see how that goes first, then make your decision.

If you're truly worried even after agreeing to send your child to camp, it may be a good idea to visit the camp grounds before the session starts so your child can familiarize himself with the area, know where the medical office is, even see his room, so he can visualize his summer there. That way, when camp starts, things won't seem so scary.

Some camps such as Camp Kennybrook in New York provide methods for parents to stay in close contact with their campers by using online photos and webcams so that parents can see how their kids are doing in real time. Parents may get up at 7 AM in the morning just to see their kids. Campers also speak with their parents each week for 10 minutes by phone and are encouraged to write letters home.

Moms who miss their happy campers should try to keep busy. Have date night with your hubby, revisit old hobbies, or do anything else you've been putting off. Or share your concerns with other moms who sent their kids to camp. You'll discover that separation anxiety is a common -- and very manageable -- condition.

In addition to being a lot of fun, camp may also be a valuable learning experience. Child psychologist Frances Walfish, Psy.D., says, "For most kids, camp is a good thing." She adds, "Letting your kid live on his own teaches him decision-making skills and independence. What's more, he'll learn to negotiate for himself in a totally new environment with kids he hasn't gone to school with for years."

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- [American Camp Association](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [National Camp Association, Inc.](#)