



Choosing Child Care for School-Age Children

A Guide to for Selecting School Age and Summer Day Camp Programs

INTRODUCTION

As your child moves into elementary school, you may find that you need school-age child care to fill the gaps between your child's school hours and your work hours. The kind of care you choose will depend on many factors: availability, schedules, costs, program content, transportation, and –perhaps most important – your child's preference. As your child gets older, he or she will probably take part in making plans for the time spent out of school.

School-age child care options vary greatly in structure and content. While the types of available school-age child care are briefly discussed here, this publication focuses primarily on school and community-based extended-day programs, addressing what to look for in a school-age program and how to choose one that best meets your and your child's needs. The second part of this booklet deals with choosing summer day camp – other Child Care, Inc. publications discuss family child care, in-home care, and self-care.

The child care resource and referral agency serving your area can provide you with information about school-age child care programs, services and other resources in your community.

KINDS OF SCHOOL-AGE CHILD CARE

School-age child care settings include schools, community agencies and centers, day care centers, religious institutions, summer camp facilities, family child care homes, and, of course, your own home. A particular program or arrangement can serve any or all of the times your child may need care: before school, after school, on holidays and snow days, during school and summer vacations.

After-school programs, sometimes referred to as “latchkey” or extended-day programs, are designed specifically to serve the needs of working parents and their children. These extended-day programs usually operate on school days, on holidays, during school vacations, and/or during summer vacations. These programs generally serve younger school-age children (5 to 9 years old); programs designed for slightly older children (10 to 12 years old) may not provide close supervision but rather allow children to come and go as they wish.

In choosing a child care arrangement for your child, you may use one or several of the following options:

CARE AT YOUR CHILD’S SCHOOL

Some public and private schools offer programs to fill the gaps between school hours and normal work hours; some private schools that close in early June also have special programs that cover the days until summer camps begin. These extended-day programs may be operated by the school or by an outside agency. Since the care is offered in your child’s school, transportation is usually not an issue.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

A community agency will often operate early morning and/or late afternoon child care in a non-school facility. Community centers, YM/YWCAs and YM/YWHAs are example of such agencies. Some day care centers for preschoolers also offer extended-day care for elementary school children. Community programs may provide an escort or bus service to transport children to and from school, sometimes at additional cost.

EDUCATIONAL AND ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

Some schools and community agencies offer specific educational and enrichment activities before or after school: dramatics, music, art, sports, etc. These activities are usually supervised only by the specialized teacher, and might not meet your scheduling needs, because they may not cover the entire time your child needs care. Also bear in mind that transportation issues must be considered if the program is offered away from your child’s school.

CARE IN SOMEONE ELSE’S HOME

Family child care providers, who provide care for children in their own homes, often take school-age children before and after school, and on school holidays. Alternately, you

may find a retired person or non-working parent in your neighborhood who can care for your child. Transportation is sometimes an issue.

SUPERVISED CARE IN YOUR OWN HOME

Another option is to arrange for a family member, friend or neighbor to care for your child in your home. Consider a retired neighbor or friend, a relative or a responsible older child, high school or college student. Teaming up with another family in a shared child care arrangement could benefit both families and reduce cost.

SELF-CARE

Having a child come home alone may be your option, either because you have not been able to make other arrangements or because your child is older and wants nothing to do with programs for “little kids.” If you choose the self-care option, however, you should consider your child’s maturity and ability to supervise himself or herself. You must also consider how comfortable you and your child feel with such an arrangement, how safe your neighborhood is, and what kind of support system is available to your child.

SUMMER CAMPS AND RECREATION PROGRAMS

Many private and public schools, agencies, religious institutions, community centers, and youth organizations offer summer camps and recreation programs for school-age children. The programs may be part of full-day, part of full week, part of full-summer. Camps are either day camps or sleep-away camps. Generally, sleep-away camps are more suitable for older children, ages 8 to 14, depending on the child’s maturity and past experience sleeping away from home. Transportation to and from these summer programs may not be provided—if it is, there may be an additional cost. (See Choosing a Summer Day Camp, starting on page 7)

FINDING A SCHOOL-AGE CHILD CARE PROGRAM

In your search for a before- or after school child care program, you should inquire about programs at your child’s own school or in its vicinity. It is also a good idea to call the child care resource and referral agency serving your area for information about programs in your community. Networking with neighbors, with other parents at school, or in your local park or playground can sometimes yield helpful information. School-age programs are often found in schools, community centers, child care programs, religious institutions, “Ys” and Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A SCHOOL-AGE PROGRAM

An after-school or extended-day program should not be a continuation of the school day. It should provide a place for your child to relax, explore new activities, and share time with friends.

A quality after-school program should provide the following:

- ◆ A comfortable, safe environment for children with an opportunity for both indoor and outdoor play. Space should be ample, with comfortable, soft areas for quiet activities and conversation. If any set-up is required, it should be done before the children arrive, to make the area inviting to them.
- ◆ Opportunities for one to one and small group social interaction between children of same or different ages. Older children should be given opportunities to help younger children with activities and projects, without being required to do so.
- ◆ Opportunities for children to engage in a variety of challenging yet age-appropriate activities that promote individual growth. Such activities include drama, music, creative arts, cooking, creative writing, movement and dance, games, sports and field trips. There should be opportunities for quiet activities, like homework, as well as for more active play. Children should be allowed to select some of the activities and projects in which they engage. Schedules should be flexible, with limited required participation, and children should be allowed to do “nothing” for a while.
- ◆ An adequate variety of clean, durable, age-appropriate equipment, toys, games and materials for indoor and outdoor play. There should also be adequate space to store these things.
- ◆ A warm, supportive environment that encourages growth, learning, and the development of a positive self-image and a sense of competence. The program and the staff should encourage and promote independent decision making and behavior, responsibility and self-direction, as well as experimentation, problem-solving and a healthy view of competition.
- ◆ Clear and understandable rules for behavior, developed by children and staff. Consequences for breaking the rules should also be clear and tailored to the offense. To promote constructive behavior and help children learn to resolve conflicts on their own, positive approaches to discipline should be used rather than threats, humiliation and punishment. Guidance should be given to help children learn how to make friends, resolve conflicts, and work toward a shared goal.

Appetizing and nutritious snacks. Allowing the children to cook or prepare their own snacks helps to promote sound health and nutritional practices.

Caring, resourceful experienced staff who are positive role models for the children. They should treat the children as individuals, with respect, showing no bias or favoritism based on sex, race, religion, ethnic background or social status. The staff should talk with the children and get involved in their activities, assisting rather than directing or dominating. The staff should be trained in CPR, working with groups of children, and receive ongoing supervision and in-service training.

Regular opportunities for communication between staff and parents. The program should also promote the mutual sharing of experiences, ideas and suggestions to improve the care and the lives of the children.

GETTING THE BASICS

After you have identified programs that might meet your needs and those of your child, you can begin to narrow your search by phoning for basic information. You will probably want to ask the following:

- ◆ What days and hours of care are available?
- ◆ Is the program open all day when school is closed, such as vacation and snow days? On school half-days? What about summer?
- ◆ What ages does the program serve?
- ◆ How many children are in the program?
- ◆ Are the children divided into separate groups? If so, by what criteria? How many children are in each group?
- ◆ How many adults supervise the children?
- ◆ What are the qualifications of those who supervise the children? Are they teachers? College students? High school students?
- ◆ What education and training have staff members received? What training do they receive on an on-going basis?
- ◆ What kinds of activities are available; are children permitted to select activities?
- ◆ Is there an escort or bus service to transport your child? Is there an additional cost for transportation? What back-up plans are in place if a bus is missed?

- ◆ What are the costs for the program, including transportation? Do you pay on a weekly , monthly, or yearly basis?? Do you pay in advance? Are there discounts for siblings? Scholarships or reduced tuition? Would you be able to get a refund? Under what circumstances would you be able to get refund or a credit in case of missed days or withdrawal of the child from the program?
- ◆ Are there any additional charges or special fees, such as for registration, field trips, materials, snacks or late pick-up?
- ◆ How long has the program been in operation?
- ◆ Is the program licensed or registered?

OBSERVING THE PROGRAM

After you have reviewed the information from the phone survey, the next step is to visit those programs that you sense may meet your needs and those of your child. Plan on spending a block of time – an hour so – observing the program and the staff, and talking with the director or staff members. Pay attention to the things previously listed under What to Look for in a School-Age Program; use the checklist provided by the child care resource and referral agency. Observe activities, noting the interaction among children and between children and staff, as well as children’s responses to the activities. Expect noise, excitement and children engrossed in a variety of projects. Avoid programs where children appear listless or bored and have little interaction with other children or staff.

In evaluation the program, be aware of your child’s temperament, interests, strengths, likes and dislikes, etc. Note what the program might be able to provide your child. Also, try to look at the program from your child’s perspective. Would your child be happy there? Would he or she feel comfortable with the environment and the staff? Are there children in the program that your child knows from school or your neighborhood? Would the activities be appropriately challenging and enjoyable for your child?

During the visit you will probably wish to inquire about things that were not addressed over the telephone. For example, is there adequate liability insurance coverage for the program? (Who holds the policy and what is the amount the coverage?) Is there promotional literature you can take with you to review later? Can the director supply you with names and phone numbers of parent references? You may also want to follow up your visit with calls to the proper licensing authority and the child care resource and referral agency to inquire about any reported serious complaints or violations and how they were resolved.

You may want to visit the program more than once to make sure that one day is not a carbon copy of the next. Also, arrange for your child to visit the program with you. Ask his or her opinion about the staff and the activities. The visit will help to prepare your child for the program and ease adjustment to the new setting, the new caregivers and the new routine.

There is no substitute for visiting and observing a program. If you are not able to see the program in operation, you should at least meet the director and possibly other staff members, see the facilities where your child will be spending time, and check parent references. Also, be aware that quality school-age child care programs are tailored to the changing characteristics and needs of the children they serve.

MAKING A DECISION

Be sure to contact several programs if available. When deciding on a specific program for your child, consider the following:

- ❖ Does the program appear to be one that your child will enjoy?
- ❖ Does it meet your expectations?
- ❖ Are the transportation arrangements feasible and dependable?
- ❖ Do the hours offer you the flexibility you need?
- ❖ Can you afford the cost of the program?

Once you have decided on a program, it is important to think about how to help make it work well for you and your child. Allow your child to visit and observe the program, meet the staff, become familiar with the program and any transportation arrangements. Also, make sure your child understands what to do should he or she miss the bus or pick-up.

It is important to be involved with your child's after school and regular school programs. Whenever you can, stop by and attend activities; talk to your child about the program. Ask the director or staff what your child does in the course of the afternoon. In which activities does he or she participate and at what level? How does he or she get along with staff and the other children? Also ask how you can participate.

In summary, allow yourself ample time to find, evaluate, and select a school-age child care program that will work well for you and your child. Remember that you are the best judge of what is appropriate for your child. Trust your instincts, which can be your best guide in selecting child care.

CHOOSING A SUMMER CAMP

CHOOSING A SUMMER DAY CAMP

Summer is an exciting time for children, and summer day camp be a part of that excitement. It offers fun, new friends, and an opportunity to develop new skills and enhance once already acquired. Finding the right day camp for your child can be a challenging task. This section of the booklet will help you to understand the key factors in making a well-informed decision about summer day camp. It will help you to choose an appropriate camp for your child, and provide guidelines for what a good camp should offer. Remember that your own needs as a parent are as important as the needs and desires of your child. It is vital that you allow your child to participate in the decision-making so that you are both happy with whatever arrangements are made.

To allow yourself ample time for selection, you should start gathering information about summer day camps in February. Begin by phoning your child care resource and referral agency. Its counselors can give you information about summer programs in your area: types of programs, hours, age groups, activities available, and fees. You can also ask for information at your child's school, and check with such community organizations as: YMCAs, YMHAs, girls' and boys' clubs, churches, run by the parks and recreation departments, beach clubs, and other local organizations. Other parents are also an excellent resource—find out where your child's friends have gone and contact those programs.

If your son or daughter has been attending an after school program that also runs a summer day camp, this is certainly an option to consider. The director and staff, and some aspects of the program may be different during the summer months, but if you've been happy with the basic philosophy and program, and your child is happy there, you may want to stick with the program.

YMCAs and other local organizations often hold camp fairs where representatives from several camps are available to talk with you and your child. This is a terrific way to get information on a number of camps at one time.

If you have to make a selection without being able to observe a day camp in operation, it is important that you gather as much information as you can. Begin by asking the camp to send you whatever written material they have. Make a list of all your questions before you call the director, who will be one of your best sources of information.

Many camps hold open houses or orientation meetings in the early spring, functions at which you can meet the director and some of the key staff members, and perhaps see slides of camp activities. Whenever possible, visit camps the summer before you are considering enrolling your child. Speak with other parents about their experience with various programs.

ACTIVITIES

What kinds of activities are most important to you and your child? Does your child love sports or gymnastics? Would he or she be happiest spending the majority of camp time doing physical activities like swimming, tennis or baseball? Or would your child prefer a program devoted to arts and crafts, or music? Would nature studies capture your child's imagination? Or computers? Might a varied program best suit your child, one with lots of field trips? Keep in mind that there are day camps that fit each of these needs.

LOCATION AND HOURS

Where is the camp located? How far is it from your home? What are the hours? Will your work schedule permit you to drop off your child in the morning and pick him or her up in the afternoon? Does the camp provide transportation? How much does it cost? Summer day camps are frequently not geared to the hours of parents who work full-time. Many run from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and may provide pre-camp supervision in the early morning and post-camp supervision in the late afternoon. There will almost certainly be an additional fee for this service.

FEES

Fees for summer day camps vary tremendously. Sometimes scholarships are available for eligible families. Ask if the fee includes transportation, lunch, and snacks, and if there any additional expenses (e.g., field trips)? If you need to pay for transportation or coverage beyond the camp's regular hours, be sure to include these costs when you figure out the total cost of the camp.

TRANSPORTATION

You may select a day camp in the country or at the beach. For city kids, this can be a nice change of scene. Since traveling is involved, it is important to find out how much time your child will spend on a bus each day. Generally pre-school children cannot manage more than 45 minutes on each bus each way. Would your child feel comfortable with a daily trip? Ask if your child will be among the first or the last to be picked up? What kind of buses are used? Are there seat belts for each child? Who are the drivers? Are counselors onboard to supervise, or is the driver the only adult?

FACILITIES AND PROGRAM

Before making a decision to place your child in a day camp program, check out the following, bearing in mind that children who have been cooped up in school all year appreciate trees, birds and open spaces: Are there good outdoor play areas? Are the physical surroundings attractive? Are regular field trips scheduled? What kinds of sports are offered? Is there an outdoor pool or a lake for swimming, boating and water skiing? You might even ask if there are tennis courts, or if the camp offers horseback riding. Are such field sports as baseball and soccer a part of the program? Are the instructors of these special sports well trained and experienced? What other activities are available? Arts and Crafts? Drama? Gymnastics? What about indoor facilities for rainy days?

WHAT CONSTITUTES A GOOD DAY CAMP?

There are certain features that any good camp should have:

An Enriching and Enjoyable Program

This is a vacation for kids, a time to have fun, make new friends, and share experiences that are special to camp life. It is also a good time to try new things, with the encouragement of supportive adults. Camp is the place where many children learn to swim and dive, play tennis and volleyball, ride a horse – sports they will enjoy for the rest of their lives. Children should be encouraged to have new adventures and take advantage of what is offered, but they shouldn't be pressured into participation in activities for which they are not ready.

Younger children need some consistency in their daily schedule, guidance in choosing activities, and the opportunity for quiet times within an active camp schedule. Older kids should be allowed to make choices about how to spend their time so they can concentrate on their favorite activities. Find out what the daily schedule is like for someone of your child's age. Do younger campers have a quiet rest time after lunch? Do older campers go on more frequent trips? Are there provisions for shade and shelter as well as for indoor activities?

A PLEASANT AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Whether city- or country-based, the camp facilities should be well maintained and safe. All equipment must be in good condition. Indoor areas need to be bright, cheerful and well ventilated; outdoor spaces must be free of litter, glass, and other hazards. Swimming pools, ponds, and lakes should be clean and partitioned into shallow and deeper areas, providing a safe place to learn for children who have not yet learned to swim.

There should be adequate and clean toilet facilities. If the camp provides, meals, food should be nutritious, ample and attractively served in pleasant surroundings. It should include fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as protein, carbohydrates and milk. Nutritious snack should be available for children who want them in the afternoon. All foods should be refrigerated, and the kitchen area kept clean, with no evidence of bugs or rodents.

QUALIFIED AND CARING STAFF

The importance of leaving your child in the hands of a qualified, experienced, and caring staff cannot be overemphasized. Check to see if the camp hires skilled and experienced specialists to supervise its activities. You will want to make sure that any high-risk activities, such as swimming, horseback riding, and gymnastics are supervised by fully qualified teachers who enforce safety precautions. Also check on the adult-child ratio to make sure there are enough people available to supervise the children who participate in these activities.

Many camp counselors are college students, some are high school students. You should ask their ages and the criteria for hiring them. Find out how closely they are supervised by the director and what orientation and training they receive before the camp season begins. The head counselor for your child's group should have at least a high school diploma and three years of child-care-related experience.

APPROPRIATE NUMBER OF STAFF

Camps generally divide children into age groups, with a specific counselor in charge of each group. For younger children (4 to 9 years), the ratio should be more than ten children to each adult. For older children (8 to 12 years), one adult to fifteen children is adequate. However, when the children are involved in sports—ball games, riding, swimming, gymnastics—there should always be additional adult supervision.

Your decision will depend on what you can afford, what schedule accommodates your needs, and what kind of experience you and your child feel would be the most fun. Avoid programs where you feel pressured to make a decision or that the staff doesn't want to spend time answering your questions.

If you know other parents who have used the camp, talk to them. If you don't, ask the director for the names of a few parents you can call. Parents are an excellent source of information. Ask them specific questions about how activities were handled, what they liked most, what they didn't like, and how they felt about the director and staff. Find out if they had any problems and, if so, how they were resolved.

A child of seven or older will probably want to be involved in the decision, but if your options are limited, explain that to the child. You may be able to find or afford the ideal camp, but together you can figure out your priorities.

The camp should provide you with medical forms for your doctor to fill out. These should be placed in the camp's files before your child starts, along with the phone numbers of parents or guardians, and the names and numbers of additional contacts – friends or relatives—who can be reached in an emergency.

It is standard procedure for camps to ask you to fill out a trip permission slip, and a release form allowing them to seek medical attention for your child in an emergency. Make sure they understand that in such a situation you would expect them to contact you immediately.

It is imperative that camp staff be told—in writing—who is authorized to bring and pick up your child. Have them give you assurance that they will never release your child to any other person unless they have been instructed by you to do so.

If your child is old enough to go unescorted to and from the camp program, you should inform the staff of this arrangement. If the child is to travel on camp provided transportation, make sure that you and the camp are clear as to the time and place for the morning pickup and afternoon return. A child who has to wait alone for the bus in the morning should be given clear instructions on what to do in case the bus doesn't show up by a certain time. If your child is traveling alone, make sure that he or she always carries phone money and numbers at which you and the camp can be reached.

Make sure your child has whatever you have been told is needed: a lock her locker, a bathing cap, sneakers. Take her with you when you shop for these items. Tell your child what you know about the facilities and counselors and the kinds of activities available. An older child will be able to read the literature and, if she has participated in the decision, will probably be looking forward to the experience. Younger children who have never been to camp have no idea what to expect. Be as specific as you can about what the schedule will be like and who the counselor will be, and talk about the new friends they will make. If you have a young child going to a local camp, plan to stay for a while with her the first morning, so you can meet her counselor and help her get settled. Some older kids will want to push you right out the door, feeling embarrassed by having a parent around, but it's still a good idea to arrange your schedule so you can stay if your child wants you to.

Try to leave a few minutes in the morning at pickup time to check with your child's counselor about how things are going. If your child comes and goes in camp-provided transportation, try to arrange to pick him up occasionally so he can show you some of the things he's doing and introduce you to his friends. This will also provide you with the opportunity to touch base with his counselor. If this isn't possible, phone the director to chat about how things are going.

Encourage your child to tell you about his day, the friends he's making, and activities he participates in. If he is unhappy, try to find out exactly what the problem is, and discuss it promptly with the counselor or director.

If there are events to which parents are invited: visiting day, potluck supper, sports exhibition, or a play, do your best to be there.