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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Choosing the Right Summer Camp

“I don’t want to be here! I want to go home,” wailed the girl in Katie Daly’s office at a 4-H overnight camp last summer. Daly, a 4-H educator with University of Delaware Cooperative Extension, called the girl’s mother, who agreed that she should wait another 24 hours before going home.

“What a difference a day makes,” recalls Daly. Both staffers and campers made a concerted effort to engage the girl in activities, and by the end of the second evening, she was the life of the party at the camp dance. “She had a huge smile on her face for the rest of the week,” says Daly.

It wasn’t just sheer luck that the girl rebounded from her case of nerves. “The mother had done her homework and researched the 4-H overnight camp experience before enrolling her daughter,” says Daly. “She also had thought about her daughter’s likes and dislikes and matched her with a camp that fit her personality and interests.”

Most importantly, the mother felt confident that her daughter was emotionally ready for an overnight camp experience. One of the best ways to determine this, says Daly, is reflecting on how a child handles sleeping at a friend’s house.

“Parents know their child best,” says Mark Manno, state 4-H educator for UD Cooperative Extension. “Don’t send your child to camp, especially an overnight camp, if he or she doesn’t ask to go first.” But don’t be surprised if your child – the same one who begged to go to camp – gets second thoughts much like the girl in Daly’s care. “First-day jitters are very, very common,” says Manno.

When today’s parents were growing up, making a decision about summer camp wasn’t hard. Choices were few and most kids went to the same day camp and/or overnight camp that everyone in the neighborhood attended.

These days, parents and children are faced with a bewildering array of choices. First, will the child attend day camp, overnight camp, or maybe a week or two of each? Will it be a coed camp or single sex? A large camp or small? Highly structured or one that allows for free time? Close to home or far away?

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And that's just the tip of the iceberg...after that it's time to look at the curriculum. Are the parent and child looking for a specialty camp or general interest experience?

There are specialty camps for sports, the sciences, music, drama, the creative arts, history, politics and even forensic science. There are camps for children with special needs, ranging from diabetes to asthma. There are camps for adopted kids, for children who are trying to lose weight and for kids who love math.

General interest camps are a popular choice. Manno is a big fan of this kind of camp, especially for younger children. "Up until 4th or 5th grade, most kids find that everything interests them, so a general camp gives them a chance to explore," says Manno. But these "little-bit-of-everything" camps are a far cry from the camps of yesteryear, back when lanyard-weaving, swimming and making s'mores topped the list of activities.

For example, Joy Sparks, state 4-H program coordinator for UD Cooperative Extension, says that today's 4-H general interest campers learn about environmental science, health and nutrition, nature, music, art, world cultures and much more. They learn how to use high-tech GPS technology as well as learn traditional camp songs.

Patricia Tanner Nelson, a UD Cooperative Extension family and child development specialist, says that neighbors and friends can be an invaluable source of information. "Which camps have they had good experiences with?" says Nelson. "And, more importantly, do they know which camps to avoid?"

If possible, visit camps with your child, says Nelson. Schedule an appointment with the camp director and/or camp teachers and counselors. Nelson recommends asking these questions of camp personnel:

Staffing

- What is the hiring process for camp staff?
- Are staffers screened for criminal records?
- What training do staffers receive?
- What expectations do they have for behavior? What is their philosophy of discipline?

Camp Atmosphere

- What does a daily schedule look like?
- What is the balance between active and quiet activities? Group and individual activities?
- What kinds of food are served at meals and snacks?
- What is the adult/child ratio? How many campers in each group?
- How big is the camp?
- For overnight camps, how much sleeping/personal space does each child have?

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Safety and Health

- Is the camp accredited by the American Camping Association?
- Are medical examinations and immunizations required?
- Is a fulltime nurse/physician on staff?
- What are the procedures in case of emergency?
- Is all staff trained in CPR?
- If your child has special health needs, including periodic medication, how well can the camp meet those needs?

Fees and Related Costs

- What extra charges will there be?
- Will the down payment be refunded if you cancel?
- Will you need to purchase special clothing and/or camp uniforms?
- For overnight camp, are there laundry facilities? Are these machines free or coin-operated?

Nelson also recommends getting references from parents of children who attended the camp you are considering. For more information on choosing the right camp, Nelson suggests the American Camping Association website, www.acacamps.org.

Regardless of which camp you ultimately choose for your child, rest assured that summer camp is an opportunity for growth and learning. “Participation in camping has a number of benefits and outcomes that have been documented in research, including social skills development, character building, self-respect and community living development,” says Sparks. “Here in Delaware 4-H, parents often share information on how their camper grew and developed in responsibility, resourcefulness, leadership and communication.”