



February 3, 2011

How to Choose a Camp for Children with Special Needs

By Gina Maranga

Gina Maranga, director of program operations at [Block Institute](#) in Brooklyn, offers advice on how to select the best summer camp for a child with special needs.

When selecting a summer camp for your child with special needs, first ask yourself if the child is ready for the camp experience. Then determine if it should be a day camp, a sleep away camp, or a short-term Respite Camp. Another consideration should be how much time the child should spend in camp. Is it the child's first experience in a camp setting?

Additional questions to consider include:

- **If your child needs a special diet, can the camp provide appropriate meals?** If the camp is unable to provide food to accommodate the needs of your child then find out if the camp allows parents to provide meals for the child. Also, keep in mind that this may not be the best time for your child to experiment with new foods that may be unfamiliar.
- **If physical accessibility is an issue, what's the layout of the camp?** Parents of special needs children who require handicapped accessible facilities should take a close look at the buildings, the walkways (are they paved?), the restrooms and recreational facilities. If special provisions need to be made for your child, get an assurance in advance that the camp is willing to do so. If your child has problems with memory or recognition, are the buildings easily identifiable? Every little detail can make a big difference for a special needs child.
- **Do staff members have a background working with kids with special needs?** Find out how if staff members have experience dealing with your child's specific needs, or will this be a new experience for them. This is especially important if your child has behavioral issues. Parents should plan early in the year to look at a list of camps that specialize in meeting the needs of their child, so that the summer is a time of healthy and fun activities that meet the abilities of the campers.
- **What's the procedure if your child develops a complication related to his or her medical problems?** Make sure the camp has a plan in place and is aware of the nearest hospitals. It's also important to make sure that if your child needs specialized treatment it's available at the hospitals.
- **What is the staff like?** Parents may want to attend a camp orientation, along with their child, to meet staff and help their child with special needs learn who will be caring for them during

camp. Families of special needs children will most likely be asked to supply written paperwork regarding their child's disability, likes and dislikes, in addition to any other information required of campers anywhere.

Gina Maranga is the director of program operations at [Block Institute](#), a Brooklyn educational facility dedicated to serving the needs of children and adults with developmental disabilities.