

YAHALOM GUIDE PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR FIRST-TIME *Sleepaway Camp*



Yahalom

PROVIDING FAMILIES THE RESOURCES
TO HELP THEIR DIAMONDS SHINE





WHY WE LOVE SLEEPAWAY CAMP

Sleepaway camp gives children a chance to grow in ways that wouldn't happen at home or school. It's almost magical! Camp also gives a necessary break for the family to catch its breath and rejuvenate.

Benefits for the child:

- Kids often gain skills in toilet training, communication, social skills, executive functioning, independence, and more.
- Total immersion in a therapeutic environment with one-on-one attention can be a big developmental boost.
- Children with special needs work very hard to get through their day! Camp's calmer pace, natural learning environment, and beautiful outdoor setting give them much-needed fun.
- Kids expand their network of familiar staff. Parents find a new circle of potential respite workers who love and know their children well.

Benefits for the family:

- Siblings and families get a well-deserved respite.
- Parents can “fill the cups” of other siblings and themselves.
- Without the hectic pace of the child with special needs, parents can think through decisions. It's a good time to plan changes that will benefit the child and family.

Convinced? Great! Let's get into the details of planning your child's summer.



CHOOSING THE RIGHT CAMP

Finding the right camp is an important decision. Take your time and be as thorough as you like. B”H, our world has many outstanding special needs camps for you to consider.

Do your research

Ask as many questions as you need to feel comfortable that the camp is a safe, trusted environment.

Health – Ask about procedures for medications, what professionals are on staff, and how close the camp is to an EMT or hospital.

Diet - How much will the camp work with your child's dietary needs?

Personal safety - What policies does the camp enforce to keep kids safe?

Be realistic

The most important criterion in choosing a camp is finding an environment where your child will feel socially accepted and be in an appropriate peer group. The right camp will be a natural match that brings out the best in your child.

Paperwork

Get used to MASSIVE quantities of redundant and specific paperwork. Once you're done with the camp application and medical forms, however, you've gotten through most of it.

Sending very young children to camp

Many children with special needs start sleepaway camp at 4.5 - 5 years old. Although it may be emotionally challenging to send your young child, all the above benefits still stand. The children make terrific progress over the summer and enjoy the new environment. When researching camps, you can feel confident that if a camp accepts young children, it has staff who will be like a loving Mommy to your child for the duration of the summer.

PREPARING FOR CAMP



Our veteran parents generously shared their tricks and tips:

Packing

When packing, place clothing in giant-size Ziplock bags. Label each bag (weekday shirts, Shabbos pants, pajamas, swimming clothes, etc.) so the counselors know exactly what should be worn and when, especially if you are sending to a camp with male staff.

Labeling

Label EVERYTHING! That includes equipment, orthotics, and braces. Send extra labels just in case and for items your child will get in camp.

Keep your favorite things at home

You want your child to look cute but don't send your favorite outfits. It's hard for counselors to keep track of every child's belongings, and your child will be doing all the fun and messy activities that he can't do at home. Plus, the camp laundry isn't as good as your own laundry. Many things may not come home the way you sent them, and some things won't come at all. That's ok! The positive effects of camp far outweigh the t-shirts you'll never see again.

STARTING ON THE RIGHT FOOT



Prepping your child and the staff can avoid "bumps" at the beginning of camp. Camps are staffed with dedicated professionals and teens who love children! Don't hesitate to reach out to them before camp as your partners for an amazing summer.

Transitioning

Changes, even fun ones, can be hard. But you can prepare your child well in advance of camp to smooth the transition.

Talk to your child about:

- What to expect at camp
- Who will be there from his/her class
- What will be similar to school
- What he/she will bring to camp that is familiar.
- Show your child a calendar of when he/she is leaving, and when he/she will return home

Briefing the camp staff

The more prepared the camp is, the better it can care for your child. Invest the time to type up detailed notes and instructions for your child. Ask your child's teachers and therapists to write activity reports for your child, too. Before camp, send those reports to the staff. If the camp offers therapy, send the therapists the reports and ask about speaking to the therapists before camp.

Meeting your child's staff

Some camps will send counselors to meet the campers at home if you request it. This is invaluable for you and your child's comfort! Even if you know the counselors from school or respite, showing them your child's daily routines at home is helpful.

If possible, take your child to camp on the first day so you can meet the counselors, therapists, and teachers. It is extremely beneficial for you and the staff to connect in person. Plus, you'll feel better knowing exactly where your child will spend the summer.

Be careful not to overwhelm the counselors with too much information about your child. Give the main, crucial instructions either before camp or during the first few days. (See the "Communication" section for more info.)



AN INCREDIBLE CAMP EXPERIENCE

Camp is here! You can look forward to pictures of your child's brightest smiles ever. Will there be bumps? Of course, but here's expert advice on how to minimize the rough spots.

Homesickness

Help your child adjust to camp by sending familiar, favorite objects, such as toys, books, dolls, picture albums, or recordings of your family.

It might be helpful to send favorite, non-perishable food and drinks for the beginning of camp. This is especially true for picky eaters or children on special diets. Having your child's favorite foods on hand will smooth the transition until the camp kitchen is stocked and the counselors get used to what your child needs and likes.

Medication/dietary restrictions

Most camps have strict medication policies requiring you to send blister-pack medication before the summer. If your camp doesn't have that policy:

- Go over all medications with the camp nurse before your child arrives to make sure they have everything in stock with the correct dose.
- Pack medications in a special pocket of your child's suitcase.

- Let the staff know if you gave that day's dose.
- Also, make sure the camp fully understands your child's dietary restrictions.

Visiting day

Consider in advance what your child can handle for phone calls and visits. In particular, the transitions and emotional impact of Visiting Day can be very challenging for a child with special needs.

Camp rules

While you may have to advocate for your child sometimes, always be polite and respect the camp's rules. The staff cares deeply about the kids and wants everyone to thrive. Treat the staff as the committed partners they are!



COMMUNICATION

Communication is so vital that it gets its own section! It's one of the most crucial factors in your child's unforgettable camp experience.

Some camps don't allow you to speak directly with the counselors or only allow limited communication. Ask about the camp's policy in advance, and advocate for yourself if you need more.

No two children are alike! Even the best camp for special kids needs to learn about your child. For best results, be very specific with your instructions:

- "Please cut his food to this size."
- "He won't ask for a drink but must have 20 oz a day."
- "She can be in the sun for only 10 minutes at a time and always needs suntan lotion."

To avoid false emergencies, be very specific about what's normal behavior for your child:

- "Her hand trembles, but that's not a seizure."
- "He loves orange juice, but it makes him hyper."
- "He needs his sleep - or else!"

This information takes time to compile, but you'll reap the benefits all summer. Observe your child now for a few days while you aren't pressured with packing. Jot down notes about what you need to tell his counselors.

Type your notes and send them to camp. Then tell the information to the counselors when they call before camp. And reiterate it when you meet the counselors on the first day.

To ensure your child's success, give your instructions to the group leader as well as the counselor. Many camps rotate the campers and counselors in each bunk, so this way there is always someone who understands your child's needs.

Create a chat group with your child's counselors or give them your number to text. Encourage them to send you pictures and ask you any questions they may have throughout the summer.

Let the staff know you'd rather get 10 calls or texts a day than have your child lose out because the counselors hesitated to "bother" you.

Trust your gut! If something doesn't feel right, reach out to the camp and advocate for yourself and your child.

If you aren't comfortable with the counselor assigned to your child, reach out to the director. Share your feedback so he can help you or pair up your child with a better match.

Don't forget about positive communication, too. There will be countless moments when you're amazed at the staff's dedication and creativity. Take the time to send a quick text or email. Compliments and praise are always appreciated!

MANAGING YOUR EMOTIONS



Sending any child to camp can be hard, and sending away a vulnerable, high-needs child may be even more difficult.

Permission to feel

You will probably feel a range of emotions.

As you prepare your child for camp, you may feel happiness, sadness, anxiety, relief, guilt, hope, doubt, or worry. These are all normal and valid and will come and go throughout the summer. Accept your emotions and allow yourself to feel each one.

Once camp starts, you may be missing your child and thinking of your child a lot. This is completely normal and valid.

You may enjoy your freedom and the ability to do things with your family that you usually can't do. This is, again, normal and valid.

Before your child returns home, you may feel conflicting emotions like happiness and sadness at the same time. Once again, this is all normal and valid.

Letting go

A mother's natural inclination is to keep kids close and safe. This is true for both special needs and typical children. However, part of our growth as parents is trusting that our kids will be okay and that the environments we choose to put them into will be kind to them. It can be hard to learn to let go, especially if the child cannot give clear feedback about how things are going. But as parents, we do responsible hishtadlus and trust Hashem to watch over our children.

Especially for children with special needs, we must give them the opportunity to go so we can focus on our other kids, our spouses, and ourselves. Most children love camp, and your family can use the time to enjoy a more flexible routine and strengthen yourself for the whole year.



TIPS FROM MOTHERS OF OTHER FIRST-TIME CAMPERS

- Before my son went to camp for the first time, my biggest worry was that the staff wouldn't "get" him. THEY GOT IT!!!! While every child is unique, the staff has seen it all, and they are prepared and trained!!!!
- Label, label, label! A LOT of stuff won't come home, but unlabeled things don't stand a chance.
- I found it very helpful for my son to send a lot of pictures for his wall and other sentimental things.
- Send your child to camp with a nice letter, bar of chocolate, or tip for the counselors so they know right away how appreciated they are.
- The staff wants to stay in touch but reaching them in camp is often complicated. They are very busy, and service is not always good in the mountains.
- As special needs moms, we are used to knowing the most specific details of our children's day, like what they ate and when they slept and used the bathroom. They won't be informing you of every detail while they are at camp, but your child is still well cared for! In this case, no news is good news. If there's a problem, the camp knows how to find you!
- Figure out what works best for your family for drop-off, pick-up, and visiting day. It may take a few years of trial and error. You live and learn.
- Don't stress your decisions too much. Your child will adapt just fine.
- Give yourself and your child time to readjust to being home. There will likely be some temporary regression in some areas for your child. Expect this and adjust your expectations. Do whatever you can to help your child reacclimate to being home.

Try to take advantage of the time your special needs child is away. The first year my son was in camp, I was so caught up in missing him and adjusting to my time without the day-to-day responsibilities of my special needs child that before I knew it, he was home! Instead, enjoy and relax. You deserve and need this break!

Despite some anxiety before sending a child to camp for the first time, most kids and parents are amazed at the gains and growth over a productive, happy summer. Camp's positive effects spill into the entire year!

Hatzlacha raba in facilitating a fantastic camp experience for your child. Please reach out to Yahalom with questions or to connect with other mothers who sent children to camp. We want every child and family to have the privilege of the optimal sleepaway camp experience.

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