

By Adrienne J. Arkontaky Esq.

Finding the Right Camp

FOR YOUR CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Thinking about choosing a summer camp in the snow days of winter may seem a tad early, but as many parents know, it is imperative to start planning early as many camps have limited openings and finding the “right” camp can be a challenge. Choosing a summer camp for children with special needs can be even more daunting for families.

Most important, parents should consider what setting can best suit the child’s needs. Many parents want summer to be a more relaxed environment for children. However, many children with special needs need the continued structure and reinforcement of a special education program. Parents and professionals also want to maximize the child’s opportunities to grow throughout the year and find programs that promote independence and offer positive reinforcement to children.

Your Child’s Needs

Parents should consider whether a child’s needs would be best suited in a camp structured specifically for children with disabilities or whether the child would be happier in a mainstream setting. Families should make a list of the supports they believe are necessary to give the child a fun, nurturing and safe experience. Families should consider whether the child has medical needs that need to be attended to on a regular basis. Does the child need on-going assistance during the day, perhaps a one-on-one aide or a “buddy” assigned to the child?

The family should consider the child’s age, interests and their social and emotional maturity. Whenever possible, involve the child in the discussions and take the opportunity to possibly explore new experiences for the child.

Families may want to explore programs that offer the child additional opportunities for learning over the summer. Many children with special needs often find it difficult to “settle in” once school starts. In many cases, a program that combines summer camp activities with academics assists a child to gain greater self-esteem and master academic skills over the summer.

Once families have decided what type of program they believe will benefit the child, they should thoroughly investigate the program. Speak to professionals, ask for references, and speak to families of children who have attended the program. Ask for the program to send a DVD so you can see the



activities and get a sense of what the child will experience on an everyday basis. If a family is considering a “sleep-away” camp, perhaps they want to send the child on short respite weekends to ready the child for the summer experience.

Qualifications

Families should ask the camp for the qualifications of their counselors and what the screening process is for choosing staff. Do the counselors have any special training or degrees? Families should ask about what procedures are in place in case of emergencies. In the case of a child who has acute medical needs, how far is the nearest hospital?

Whenever possible, the family should take a tour of the camp and meet with the staff personally. It is also a good idea to provide the camp personnel with the child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan so that the camp personnel may obtain an idea of the child’s needs.

Of course, all families (and camps) hope for a successful camp experience. However, parents should plan for the occasional circumstance when the camp experience does not work out and the child needs to leave for any reason. There should be a contingency plan in place. For instance, perhaps a child is eligible for an extended year school program through the local school district but the family has opted out and decided to send the child to a private camp instead. If the camping experience does not work out, the family may want to speak to the school district about taking advantage of the school program.

There are many resources today where families can explore camp options for their children with special needs. Whatever options a family chooses, proper planning and research can result in lasting, wonderful memories for a child with special needs and the family. ♦

Adrienne J. Arkontaky, Esq., Partner, Littman Krooks LLP. Arkontaky’s practice focuses on special needs planning for families of children with disabilities, special education advocacy, guardianship and life planning for families of loved ones with disabilities. She is a member of the Council of Parent Advocates and Attorneys (COPAA). She serves on the boards of the John A. Coleman School and is acting president of Family Ties of Westchester.