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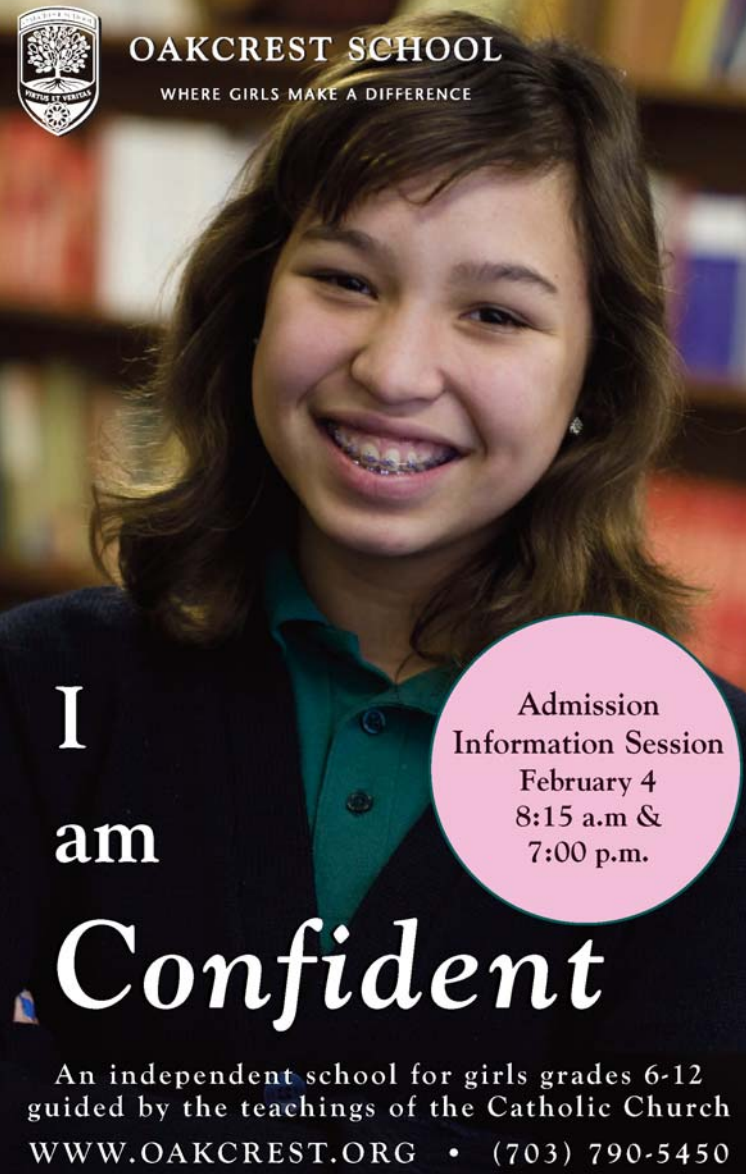


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Ready, Set, Go

Now is the time to choose summer camps.

By Hanna Kozlowska

Families in the Washington area are known for procrastinating on camp decisions, said Greg Cronin, a camp consultant. Due to the job turnover and general population mobility in the area, many parents aren't sure what they will be doing during the summer. "There might be a change in administration, war, a job transfer, change in financial security," he said.

Not only do they make decisions later, but they also have a history of choosing shorter camp sessions. It was in the Mid-Atlantic that shorter camp sessions, especially for resident camps, were started.

"While in New England or New York children would be sent to eight-week-long overnight camps, camps in the Mid-Atlantic had two-to-four week sessions," said Karen Rosenbaum, director of the TIC camp, a technology and athletics camp with locations in McLean and Bethesda.

"Camps in our area started out much later, and had a more leisurely pace," she added.

There are 49 day and overnight American Camp Association accredited camps in Virginia. They offer activities ranging from Photography classes with a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer, inline skating with an Olympic champion to writing computer programs and creating Web sites. The trick is to choose the right camp for one's child.

"Camp has to encourage them, excite them, make them happy," said Bill Clement, father of Stephen, 12 and Charlotte, 9 who attend the Bullis day camps.

When looking for camps parents consider a variety of factors. Cronin, the consultant, lists the camps director, program and the child's friends as important determinants.

"The first thing [that I consider when choosing a camp] is a safe environment, the second is a social environment, and the third is whether the camp offers suitable activities for my children," said Clement, a stay-at-home dad.

Many parents treat camp as a form of day care for the summer. "Our [McLean] camp is a convenient place for parents who work in Tysons Corner, or in the city," said Rosenbaum, director of the TIC camp.

Phyllis Elperin, director of the Bullis School Summer Programs adds that the day care motivation is a very important factor for two working parent families, a common situation in the DC area.

Parents are also looking for a camp environment that will keep a student's skills sharp.

"It is a long time between June and September," a parent once told Rosenbaum. Children lose the ability to focus on academics during the summer. "The first three weeks of September are spent on reviewing what the children knew in June," said Rosenbaum, a former schoolteacher. "Depending on what the students have been doing during the summer, they pick up slower or faster."

Summer camp helps prevent learning loss in a variety of ways, says Cronin. Though many camps have an academic component, children learn even when participating in simple outdoor activities. "Most people would think archery is just shooting a bow and arrow," Cronin said. "But it involves listening, following instructions, hand-eye coordination, environmental range consideration, wildlife."

Some parents want to improve their child's academic skills more directly. Sean Davis, father of 14-year-old Kaylee, who has attended Bullis camps, wanted to "boost her writing."

"She resisted, as any teenager, but she took the class in addition to her art classes, which I felt was a good trade-off," he said.

Davis wanted his daughter to take a writing class after his experiences in county government, where he worked as a senior manager. "People's writing skills are very low," he said. His daughter, Kaylee went on to take photography classes at the Bullis school (even though she attends another school), and will be taking photography classes next year, in high school.

"Parents treat camp like an investment in a multi-layered experience that will pay-off



Two actors rehearse in theater camp.



Counselor Samantha Poto helps camper Sophie McIntyre learn how to walk a tightwire in a circus camp last summer at the Bullis School.

Choosing a Camp for Your Child

The National Camp Association tells parents the following questions when selecting a camp for their child.

- What is the director's age and background? How long has the director run this camp?
- What are the camp's goals and philosophy?
- What kind of camper (i.e. athletic, creative, etc.) is most likely to have a good experience at this camp?
- What kind of facilities does this camp have and how convenient are they for the campers to get to?
- What is the schedule like? Is it a structured program or one that offers a lot of choice to the camper?
- What is the camper-counselor ratio?
- What kind of staff training is provided? Are there many members of the staff who formerly attended the camp?
- What percentage of campers return each year?
- What is the total cost of the camp including extra trips or family visits?
- What are the sleeping arrangements and what type of toilet and shower facilities exist?
- What is the swimming instruction program like?
- How does the camp ensure the safety and security of its campers?
- What is the food like and who prepares it? Can the camp accommodate special dietary needs (i.e. food allergies, kosher diet, etc.)?
- What is the policy about food packages, letters home, trips off site with family, etc.?
- What medical facilities are available and what medical staff is on site?
- Is there a refund policy if a camper leaves early?
- Will the camp supply references to people interested in its program?
- What happens when the weather is bad?
- What type of insurance coverage is at the camp?

See www.summertime.org for more.

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Ready, Set, Go

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later on," said Cronin.
 "Camp opens their eyes to different possibilities, opportunities that they wouldn't have otherwise," said Elperin.

Both parents and camp directors want children to develop long-lasting interests and have a sense of accomplishment while at camp. Rosenbaum said one camper, when asked by a friend why she goes back to TIC every summer, told her friend: "Because we make great things."

"Camp boosts their self esteem: my daughter made a tie-dye t-shirt last year that she still wears. It gives her a sense of pride," said Clement.

Brendan, age 11, likes TIC primarily for the sports, and not the computer component. Many parents want their children to stay outside during the summer.

"I didn't want them to stay in the house, get too involved with electronics," said Clement.
 A single father signed up his son for the entire eight weeks of the TIC camp, a rare case which surprised Rosenbaum. At the end of the summer the father came back and said, "I didn't know I sent my kid to fat camp." The chubby

boy lost 11 pounds, thanks to the sports he participated in while at TIC camp.

Choosing camp is usually the parents' decision. However, children are getting more involved in the process.

"They locate different camps on the internet to show their parents," said Linda Pulliam of the Virginia division of the American Camp Association.

Cronin estimates that about 60 percent of the decisions are made solely by parents. Camp directors agree that parents should take their children's preferences into consideration. "Let the kid choose, it will more likely be committed," said Rosenbaum.

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Jack Chellman wears a wig in theater camp.



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