

Camp, Social & Recreational Tool Kit



This tool kit offers advice on approaching summer camps and social and recreational activities. Summer camp is an important activity for children with autism. Not only does it give your child a productive and structured environment during the summer, it can help strengthen his or her social skills and can help cultivate and develop peer relationships. Camp is also a great opportunity to generalize skills learned in other settings.

Social and recreational opportunities serve a similar purpose during the school year. Extracurricular activities are key in helping your child learn important life skills while having fun doing an activity he or she enjoys. There is no particular order to these steps – use whatever information is applicable to your family.

Milestones provides consultation services to all family members, professionals, and self-advocates. Services include connecting participants to resources and providing general information and assistance. We also offer a free Autism Help Desk. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at (216) 464-7600 or info@milestones.org.

1. What are different summer camp options for my child?

- Respite Camp = a day program at a facility that can accommodate children with disabilities who need care and attention.
- Typical Day Camp = a camp that focuses on traditional camping activities –swimming, games, physical activities, arts – and may or may not include typical peers.
- Specialty Camp = a camp that specializes in a particular sport, activity or hobby.
- Overnight Camp = a residential camp that may or may not include typical peers.

2. How do I find a camp that is a good fit for my child?

- Think about what kind of camp would be best for your child. Ask yourself these questions: Does your child need more or fewer supports to be successful in a social setting? Are you looking for an exclusively special needs camp, a typical camp with a special needs program, or a typical camp? Would your child do better with a camp that meets only a few hours a day/week or a full-day camp?
- Next, start researching camps through word-of-mouth, your community, or the internet. This Top-10 list for choosing the best camp for your child should help:
<https://www.camppage.com/articles/choosing-a-camp.php>
- You can use the “Summer and Beyond” guide from the Educational Service Center of Cuyahoga County to find a camp or summer activity. They have a link on their Parent Resources page:
<http://www.esc-cc.org/ParentResources.aspx>.
- Check out the camps we have listed in our Resource Center at
<https://www.milestones.org/resources/community-resource-center>
- Look for camps that match your child’s interests or hobbies.
- Look for camps that are staffed by trained teachers or adults rather than teens.

3. What do I ask when researching a camp?

- If the camp is not exclusively a special needs camp, discuss if children with special needs can attend. How are their needs met?
- How does the camp handle disciplinary and behavioral problems?
- What is a typical daily schedule? Is there a lot of unstructured “down time” or are the campers kept busy all day long?
- What criteria are used when hiring counselors or specialty staff?
- How is the staff trained?
- Use our Guiding Questions for Camps to help you research the right camp for your child (<https://www.milestones.org/resources/overview>)

4. How do I prepare my child for day camp?

- Start planning ahead for camp when your child is very young. Since children with ASD do not naturally learn how to be social with peers, start with short, structured, small group activities. Work with your school, SLP, behavior consultant or other professional to pinpoint and teach area of skill deficits in a one-on-one setting.
- Introduce your child to peer situations by attending library story times or other parent and child classes and playgroups. They are short (usually an hour or so), and you can easily observe and assist your child in a small group.
- Starting as a toddler, practice the concepts of sharing, taking turns and following one- or two- step directions with your child.
- Take your child to swimming pools or set up water play activities to get your child used to being in and around water. Swimming lessons might also be beneficial.
- Visit playgrounds for active play and the opportunity for social interaction.
- As the first day of camp gets closer, arrange for a visit with your child. Take a walk around and explore camp, including the bathrooms or locker room by the pool, the art room, the nurse’s office and where campers will eat lunch. Show your child where he or she will be dropped off each day and walk him or her to the place where camp starts.
- Create a profile sheet of your child giving camp counselors suggestions on how to help your child through the day. Be sure to include things such as medications, dietary restrictions, favorite activities, things that may trigger certain behaviors, and effective ways to calm your child down if he or she gets upset.
- Meet with camp counselor(s). Discuss your child’s needs with them, and how to accommodate them.
- If applicable, review medications with the nurse, as well as any behavioral issues she should be aware of.
- Get a sample schedule of what your child’s routine will be like so you can create a schedule at home (<https://www.milestones.org/resources/tool-kits/visual-supports-tool-kit>).
- Create social stories describing the camp pickup and drop off procedures, as well as describing expected social behaviors and the activities that the child will enjoy. Learn more about social stories at <http://carolgraysocialstories.com/>.

5. Is my child ready for overnight camp? Am I ready?

- Break the skills needed for overnight camp down into steps. For example, can your child get ready for bed or shower without prompting? Can they get themselves dressed in the morning? Are they able to get themselves ready to go swimming? Teaching these (and other) routines will help them become familiar with routines at camp.
- Send your child on practice overnights with relatives or at friends' houses.
- Consider starting with an overnight such as Boy or Girl Scouts, which are often one night. You might be able to chaperone, which will give you the opportunity to observe your child and assist if needed.
- There are many perspectives on camp readiness. Here are two opinions worth reviewing.
<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive>
<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/?pagelid=374>
- Explore the American Camp Association's website for expert advice at <https://www.acacamps.org/>

6. I've signed up my child for overnight camp – now what?

- Attend an open house, if possible, to let your child explore the camp with you. Learn which cabin your child will be staying in, and where the bathroom is located. Have your child meet as many camp employees as possible prior to camp starting.
- Speak with the camp director to review your child's daily schedule. You can create a schedule for him or her and review it prior to camp starting. Talk to staff about providing an overall schedule as well as mini schedules for specific activities.
- Continue to practice daily routines for self-sufficiency, along with a schedule if that is helpful – your child will learn to refer to the schedule instead of requiring parent help.
- Pre-address envelopes for your child to mail home. Practice writing letters together.
- Have your child help pack clothes and personal items.
- Use these helpful checklists for packing and getting ready: <https://www.sheknows.com/>
<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/finding-camp-special-needs.html>

7. How can I pay for camp?

- Contact your County Board of Developmental Disabilities who may be able to help fund a disability-related camp. Contact your Support Administrator (SA) or your Service Support Administrator (SSA) through your County Board and request information on assistance with paying for special needs camps.
- Research grant opportunities at <https://www.autismspeaks.org/grants-service-providers> for families seeking financial assistance for camps and other disability-related services through Autism Speaks.
- Learn more about certified Ohio Autism Scholarship providers who can pay towards camps at <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/Autism-Scholarship-Program>
- Call the camp directly and explain your situation. Express why you think their camp is a good fit for your child. Discuss options for scholarships or reduced camp fees. Some camps offer discounts if you register early.
- Try charitable, ethnic or religious organizations, they may offer special camp scholarships.
- Easter Seals offers a "Campership" program; read more information at <http://www.easterseals.com/washington/shared-components/document-library/camp/2016/2016-campership-guidelines.pdf>. Then download an application here: <http://www.easterseals.com/ci/our-programs/camping-recreation/camp-applications/resident-camp-application/p-3-campership-application.pdf>.

SOCIAL & RECREATION INFORMATION

PART 1. What social and recreational opportunities are available for my child?

- Check the Milestones calendar at <https://www.milestones.org/events> for the most current schedule. You can view activities sorted For Children, For Teens and Adults, or For Families.
- Review our Resource Center's Social & Recreation listings for teens and adults at <https://www.milestones.org/resources/community-resource-center>
- Read about other ideas for recreational activities: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/recreation-0>

PART 2. What opportunities are there if my child wants to play sports?

- Adaptive sports are a great way for your child to work on team building and social skills while getting exercise! Check out our Resource Center's social and recreation opportunities.
- Review this explanation on the legal rights of children with special needs who wish to play sports: www.hickman-lowder.com/hickman-lowder-weblog/30-disabilities/324-access-to-sports-for-children-with-disabilities.

PART 3. Where can I find adaptive swimming lessons for my child?

- Look for several options in our Resource Center under the Social & Recreation category at <https://www.milestones.org/resources/community-resource-center>
- You can also check with your local community rec center for private or adaptive swimming lessons.

PART 4. My child loves music, what might you suggest?

Music therapy is a wonderful way to integrate social skills training along with musical instruction and appreciation. Find Music Therapy resources in the Social & Recreation category of our Resource Center at <https://www.milestones.org/resources/community-resource-center>

PART 5. What programs focus on teaching social skills?

You can review the many social skills programs in our Resource Center at <https://www.milestones.org/resources/community-resource-center>

Additional Resources

Milestones has Guiding Questions that can help when you are interviewing new services for your child. These printable guides can go with you to an appointment and prompt you with questions that can help you make a decision.

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