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So many camp types, so little summer

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FRONT PAGE

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When it comes to picking summer camps for her three children, Tanya Ott starts in January.

The Vestavia Hills resident sits down with a chart of all the possibilities and walks the kids through how they can fit theater camp, church camp, science camp and family vacation into the short summer.

"It is a huge logistical thing that we go through every year," said Ott, who works full-time as news director for WBHM. "I do sometimes feel like I need an advanced degree to do this."

With more parents desperate to find child care when school is out - and a huge variety of camps available - Ott's predicament isn't unusual.

"There are so many camps now and there's such diversity that you really have to plan out the summer," said Ann Sheets, past president of the American Camping Association, which represents thousands of camps around the country.

By now, some spots have already disappeared, since many camps start registration as soon as the last summer session ends.

Beyond the basics:

Camp directors say the days of kids spending a whole summer at a single overnight camp are waning. Instead, youngsters are trying several camps a summer, some of them highly specialized.

The popularity of day camps has skyrocketed, growing nearly 90 percent in 20 years in response to the needs of working parents seeking daily child care. The American Camp Association estimates there are about 7,000 day camps and 5,000 resident camps nationwide.

In Birmingham, for example, youngsters can opt for ballet camp, sports camp - soccer, football, tennis, softball, baseball, volleyball and lacrosse - theater camp or science camp. There are camps for budding robot and software designers, dance camp for special needs children, a father-daughter basketball camp and a camp for students with attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

Even more traditional camps are breaking out of the box. According to the American Camp Association, 75 percent of camp directors have added programs or amenities in the last five years.

At Camp Skyline, a girls' overnight camp in Mentone that's been operating since 1947, campers can try mountain biking, join a trash can band or take flying trapeze lessons in addition to traditional activities such as horseback riding and archery.

Camp Cosby, a YMCA camp since 1922, has even upgraded to air-conditioned cabins. Others let students send e-mail home or have counselors upload photos for parents to view each day on the camp's Web site.

Cost a factor:

All the extras mean camp can cost as much as \$2,000 for a week away. Ott, who seeks a balance of less-expensive camps mixed with a few specialty options, says she ends up spending about \$3,000 for the summer for three kids.

And although there are cheaper options, including school programs, some charge extra fees for extended care if children need to stay past 3 p.m.

Many camps offer "camperships," even if they don't advertise them. For example, UAB's high school computer science camp, which costs \$200 a week, offers two merit scholarships and several need-based scholarships. Others may offer discounts for early registration - Camp Skyline, which costs \$2,220 for two weeks, has a \$100 early-bird discount - or if siblings attend.

"You can find an affordable camp regardless of what your income is," Sheets said. "I wouldn't dismiss a camp that seems a little bit outside of your price range."

Some camps even target needier kids. Briarwood Presbyterian's overnight camp, for example, has two free four-day sessions for children of low-income families, and another for the children of prisoners. It also offers some scholarships to the regular camps.

"I get more and more people asking about that possibility," said director Scott Hannah, who said tight economics make it harder to offer freebies. "We want every child that wants to go to camp to be able to go."

Parents can go, too:

Camp proponents swear by camp as a chance to get urban and suburban kids to experience the outdoors and nature in a way that's disappearing.

"Kids have changed over time just as society has changed," said Allen McBride, one of the owners of Camp Mac, a traditional overnight camp for boys and girls in Munford. "But on the other hand, kids still enjoy being out of doors and being with their friends."

So do adults, who are part of the latest camp trend: overnight camp experiences for entire families together. After all, who wouldn't like to join junior for two weeks of canoeing and playing baseball?

The hardest part must be getting parents to leave their BlackBerrys behind, McBride said.

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