

# Guidelines For Developing A Year-round Camping Program

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Camping has always been, and always will be an exciting experience for children. It is one of the only times that children can be "on their own" for an extended period of time. Camping creates a heightened sense of anticipation and awareness in children by placing them in an unfamiliar environment.

More and more parents are becoming cautious about sending their children to camp for financial, time, and safety reasons. There will always be those who will send their children to a week-long camp, but the need for shorter, less-expensive options is growing.

If the purpose for a "camp experience" is to provide a new environment in which to develop life-changing relationships with children, then we don't have to charge hundreds of dollars to send the children to a week-long camp in the mountains! There are ways to accomplish the environmental and spiritual goals without leaving town!

It is wonderful to be able to send children to a week-long or weekend camp, but it is also possible to create a "day camp" or a camp-like experience right on the church grounds. Here are some thoughts on how to develop a camp program, no matter where you offer it.

## DAY CAMPS

A "day camp" is generally a day trip or experience with no sleep-over. The "campers" are dropped off at the church by their parents; and they spend the day either at the church or are transported to a local site. At the end of the day, they are picked up by their parents, and taken home. A "day camp" may last only one day or may include several days in a row. "Day camps" may also stretch over weeks of time, with only one event a week.

The purpose of the "day camp" is to provide an experience for the children, while also creating a ministry environment. The benefits to a "day camp," from the parents' perspective, are the affordable cost, the local experiences, and the lack of an overnight experience.

The insurance and legal forms required for a "day camp" are almost identical to an established camp. The parents must register their children, grant permission to transport, and give permission to treat their children in an emergency. The church must carry increased liability coverage for the camp. "Day camps" are not easy to create. They take much planning. When done well, though, they can be a life-changing experience for all who participate.

### Day Camp Development Steps

1. Become aware of the various "visit options" around your town. (factories, or other unusual sites).
2. Based on the options, create a theme for the camp.
3. Create a schedule that includes a rotation of at-church and on-location experiences.
4. Contact the sites, visit the sites to create the curriculum or purpose for the visit.
5. Organize the transportation. Work the lease of a bus into the cost of the camp - no private cars!
6. Develop a team which includes people who will supervise:
  - a. The food, or food stops along the way.
  - b. The craft or other "hands-on experiences"



- c. The location experience (contact, directions, curriculum, details, etc.)
  - d. Parent communication (itinerary, camp "scoop sheet," debriefing sheets, etc.)
  - e. The paperwork (emergency release, event release, payments, incident reports, etc.)
7. Design something the children can make or take home to remind them of the day, or camp focus.

### **Day Camp Experience Ideas (Local, day trips with no overnights)**

1. Theme-related trips to local sites for tours
  - a. Factories
  - b. Fire / Police stations
  - c. Funeral homes
  - d. Department stores / malls (behind the scenes tours)
  - e. Airports
  - f. Skyscrapers
  - g. Farms / dairies
  - h. Zoos
  - i. Observatories
  - j. Indian reservations
  - k. Science laboratories
  - l. Theme parks (behind the scenes tours)
2. Theme-related trips to local sites for experiences or observations
  - a. Parks
  - b. Streams / rivers
  - c. The beach
  - d. Wilderness areas
  - e. Deserts
  - f. Caves
  - g. Rock-climbing
  - h. Unusual geologic areas (fault lines, hot springs, etc.)
  - i. Archeological sites (ruins, rock paintings, ghost towns, etc.)
3. Theme-related guests (either on campus, or travel to)
  - a. Animal trainers / animal "stars"
  - b. Emergency personnel
  - c. Military personnel
  - d. Government personnel
    - 1.) Politicians
    - 2.) Law enforcement (FBI, Homeland Security, etc.)
  - e. Stunt experts (bike, skateboard, motorcycle, karate, fights, movie stunts, etc.)
  - f. Scientists
  - g. Magicians
  - h. Sports "stars"
  - i. Singing "stars"
  - j. Bands
  - k. Movie stars
  - l. Talented people (fishing, singing, shooting, juggling, etc.)
  - m. People with unusual possessions (race cars, hot-air balloons, etc.)

## WEEKEND OR OVERNIGHT CAMPS

Ministries may choose to offer a one or two-night “mini-camp” or a weekend camp on or off the church campus. These short weekend or overnight camps can be excellent, affordable, focused experiences for families, or specific age groups.

A weekend or overnight camp can be a simple overnight “campout” in the Fellowship Hall, or a longer two-night weekend camp at a local camping facility. The number of people expected, or invited, and the purpose for the experience determines the complexity. If the purpose is for fellowship, then a one-night experience is probably sufficient. If the purpose includes teaching or discovery, then the experience is likely to require a longer time frame, and additional overnights.



### Overnight or Weekend Camp Development Steps

1. Decide on the age group(s) for the camp.
2. Decide purpose (fellowship, group development, teaching, spiritual enrichment?).
3. Based on the purpose, determine the length and setting of the camp.
4. If the camp is to be held on the church facility:
  - a. Check on availability of the rooms needed and reserve them early.
  - b. Arrange for cleanup before and after the camp.
  - c. Check on the restroom supplies needed (use the church’s supplies, buy additional?)
  - d. Acquire keys to the rooms used.
  - e. Become familiar with the A/C systems, circuit breakers, alarm systems, fire alarms, etc.
  - f. Notify the security agency of your use of the facility.
  - g. Notify the maintenance crew of your use of the facility.
5. If the camp is to be held at an off-campus location:
  - a. Check on availability of the facility and reserve it early.
  - b. Arrange for cleanup before and after the camp.
  - c. Check on the restroom supplies needed.
  - d. Acquire keys to the rooms used (if applicable).
  - e. Become familiar with the A/C systems, circuit breakers, alarm systems, fire alarms, etc.
6. Consider the “curriculum” needs:
  - a. Anything printed?
  - b. Anything bought?
7. Consider the food needs:
  - a. Are you having meals?
  - b. Are you cooking the meals, or having them delivered?
  - c. Are there snacks?
  - d. Are there any food needs for the “curriculum,” or program?
  - e. Make a shopping list and purchase the supplies.
8. Consider the activity needs and supplies:
  - a. Supplies needed for activities?
  - b. Supplies needed for security?
  - c. Emergency supplies?
  - d. Maintenance supplies?
9. Decide on the cost of the camp (supplies, facility use, curriculum, and transportation)
10. Design advertisement.

11. Create registration forms (parent permission for under 18-year-olds)
12. Create emergency forms (treatment, transportation, allergies, medications, insurance, etc.)
13. Design any necessary team or parent training.
14. Recruit volunteers (if needed).
15. Consider security:
  - a. Is there an established security patrol or system?
  - b. Are the doors or access points secured, or securable?
  - c. Are there any clear dangers associated with the facility you should be aware of?
  - d. Who will monitor security during the night?
  - e. Is there cell service at the camp?
16. Consider follow-up plans.

## **ESTABLISHED CAMPS**

An “established camp” is a camp that is held at an “established” camping facility. The camp facility is usually staffed by paid, year-round personnel who maintain the grounds, cook the meals, and provide various activity supervision (pool lifeguard, etc.). When a church brings campers to the camp, the church is usually required to provide a certain number of adult “counselors,” as well as other program supervisors.



The benefits of an established camp are more program options, meals included, maintained sleeping facilities, and on-site medical staff. Your campers benefit from years of development of the camp facility and staff. Your responsibilities include staffing (counselors only), creating a theme, developing the curriculum, and transportation; the rest is usually provided by the camp.

The “trade-off” of all the benefits is an increase in cost per camper. If you decide to use an established camp, you may be forced to increase the cost to include the camp’s fees. But, overall, the benefits far outweigh the negatives. An established camp is a destination to which your children will look forward to repeat year after year.

### **Established Camps Development Steps**

1. Decide on the camp time (seasonal?).
2. Decide on the camp location (based on availability, personal interests, or theme).
3. Order the bus to transport the children to the camp and back.
4. Based on the cost of the bus and the camp costs, set the price of the camp per child.
5. Pursue any scholarship support from your church budget or donors.
6. Verify that the camp organizes the curriculum and sets the theme. If not, design your own.
7. Create the small group experiences in conjunction with the curriculum.
8. Create the team activities (competitions, etc.)
9. Create the recreational activities.
10. Purchase the supplies for the camp.
11. Create a Camp Handbook with safety policies and procedures (if the camp doesn’t supply one).
12. Create the parent forms (event release, emergency treatment, etc.)
13. Create a counselor training process (contact the camp for assistance if possible).
14. Create a “Scoop Sheet” for the parents highlighting the important dates, items needed, location of camp, tentative schedule, emergency contact numbers, etc.

15. Recruit the counselors.
16. Create a leadership team from the counselors:
  - a. Publicity
  - b. Supplies
  - c. Activities
  - d. Communication with parents
  - e. Security (forms, etc.)
  - f. Transportation
  - g. Follow-up
17. Print the registration forms and publicize the camp.
18. Set a limit on number of campers based on number of counselors (is there a ratio from the camp?).
19. Design a follow-up program or effort after the camp (letter, reunion, etc.).
20. Evaluate the camping experience during and afterward for future camps.

## CAMP EXPERIENCES AT CHURCH FACILITIES

I'll never forget an experience I had at a large church in California. The CM leaders and I were dreaming about how to give the children camp experiences without expecting their parents to pay the outrageous price of a week-long or weekend camp. As we prayed and dreamed, we wondered why children had to go to an established camp, and pay hundreds of dollars, to have some life-changing experience. We decided to create a "camp" experience during our summer Sunday night CM program. We chose the Sunday night program because we had fewer children in attendance at that time, and we didn't have the pressure of finishing on time as we did during the Sunday morning programs. Our theme for the program was "Send your kids to camp for free without leaving town!"



We planned for about 100 kids at our first night. We were surprised and a bit concerned when parents started lining up 40 minutes early. The line stretched down the walkway and almost to the parking lot. When the program started, we had nearly 300 kids packed into the large hall! We realized that we had tapped into a deep need: a camp experience that was convenient, free, and meaningful!

Obviously, choosing the "camp" experiences that we could offer on the church campus limited our options. We learned how to be creative and how to use outside sources. Here is a process that you might use in developing a weekly at-church camp experience:



1. Determine your budget for this program (appeal to the church for additional funds for this specific program if needed).
2. Set a flexible target date to begin the program. (This date may change based on the availability of people or organizations that are willing to participate).
3. Brainstorm all the activities or experiences that make "camp" exciting for children.
4. From the brainstormed list, eliminate those activities or experiences that could NOT be done at church.
5. From the brainstormed list, eliminate those activities or experiences that could NOT be accomplished in the time of the CM service.
6. Brainstorm people or organizations **within your church fellowship** who could possibly help with carrying out those activities or experiences that remain as possibilities

7. Brainstorm people or organizations **in your area** who could possibly help with carrying out those activities or experiences that remain as possibilities.
8. Delegate someone on the team to contact the people or organizations **within your church fellowship** regarding helping with the camp.
9. Delegate someone on the team to contact the people or organizations **in your area** regarding helping with the camp.
10. Based on the results of your inquiries into people or organizations, set a tentative schedule for your program.
11. Based on the tentative schedule, determine the topics for each week. Connect the experiences or activities to scripture and determine the lesson focus for each week.
12. Determine the specific activities for each week based on the focus or scriptures for the session.
13. Present the “big picture” of the program to the supervising pastor for his awareness.
14. Present the “big picture” of the program to the church attorney and insurance agent. Ask them both for suggestions regarding legal protection during the program.
15. Establish the required forms for the children; emergency release, event forms, etc.
16. Once the entire scope of the program is set, begin the advertising of the program.
17. Prayerfully begin the recruiting process for the program.
18. Determine how to protect the children while attending the program. Set plans for security (plans for checking in/out communication between CM team members, communication with parents, etc.)
19. If the program is to be conducted outside, plan to rent exterior flood lights.
20. Determine if or how to collaborate with the youth ministry in some of the programs.
21. Continue to work on the fine points of the program plans.

After we successfully ran this program for several summers, Tracy Carpenter, one of the designers of this program produced a curriculum for this type of camp. You can view and purchase this curriculum here: [https://www.amazon.com/Tracy-Carpenter/e/B00MLN85BK/ref=dp\\_byline\\_cont\\_pop\\_book\\_1](https://www.amazon.com/Tracy-Carpenter/e/B00MLN85BK/ref=dp_byline_cont_pop_book_1)

## **GUIDELINES FOR MAKING A CAMP LIFE-CHANGING**

Have you ever gone to a “retreat” in the mountains only to discover that every minute of the retreat is programmed and spent inside stuffy rooms? If you have, it is that very feeling that you should remember as you design a camping program. If you have never experienced that sad situation, try to imagine what it feels like.

Camping is supposed to be a unique experience that is different from the usual, day-to-day experience. Camping should be fun, inspiring, new, and maybe a bit “risky.” The thrill of new environments, new experiences, new friends, and even new food adds that “spice” to a camp that you just can’t get in a weekly program. It is that “spice” that effects the campers’ hearts and minds and lays the foundation for some life-changing discussions, or contemplations. The potential for spiritual impact at a camp is perhaps higher than in any other “church” setting.



A camp can be ruined by over programming it. Here are some ways to ruin a great camp:

1. Ignore the setting – staying inside a “boring” room
2. Over programming – every minute is planned, no free time to relax or think
3. Over emphasis on safety – having too many rules, and no excitement or danger

4. Too spiritual – the events and plans are all serious, no room for fun or silliness
5. Too fun – there is no spiritual connection, just crazy fun

When you design your program, remember what you loved about camping, and build that into your program. Remember what you hated about camping and do your best to limit that influence. Do all you can to let the children, youth, or adults be free to be themselves. Provide a balance of serious thought with crazy fun. “Season” your camp with blocks of unscheduled free time. Encourage relaxation while also stimulating contemplation. If your camp is in the mountains, let the children throw rocks, go hiking, enjoy the stars, and climb the trees!

