

# CHOOSING A SUMMER CAMP ~ EQUESTRIAN STYLE

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Summer vacation has been here for a few weeks, and it's time to decide what your kids want to do for the rest of their summer. The question on the table is whether the family should put together some kind of vacation package or would the kids like to go to a summer equestrian camp? Immediately there is excitement on their faces and camp becomes the choice for summer fun.

**Not only will Horseback Riding Camps save you gas money and give you a safe trustworthy place for them to have endless fun, it will give your kids an excellent way to improve their skills riding and give them personal growth in many areas to give them a head start on the upcoming school year.** Now the job of finding the best camp for the children is at hand.

Choosing a summer camp program for your child involves some important research. Because the camp experience will have significant impact on your child's life, it's important for parents to choose a camp wisely. Here are some key factors that will help parents become well-informed when choosing a camp for their child.

***What do you and your child want?*** Regardless of the age of your child, it is important that the ultimate selection of a camp accommodate all or some of the needs, interests, goals and expectations of both parent and child. The parent must make an effort to understand what the child wants and why. Here are some questions to consider:

1. What do you and your child want to gain from the camp experience? Learn new skills, develop more self-confidence, improving proficiency in certain areas, become more independent?
2. What are the special interests that your child want to explore?
3. Are there any physical, intellectual, or social limitations that should be considered?
4. What kind of emphasis will your child profit from the most? For example: Is a lot of structure desirable, is social interaction with members of the opposite sex important, or does your child need a place where he or she is encouraged to develop at their own pace?

**With the above information in mind, it is appropriate to look at some of the specific characteristics that should be considered in determining what you and your child want.**

- ***Type of Camp:*** Take a moment to consider the type of camp that makes the most sense for your child. Is it coed, all boys, all girls, or brother/sister? Is it overnight camps or a day camp? Is it general, specialty, or offer some other program which your child is interested in?
- ***Cost:*** As a parent you have to make careful assessment of your family's financial limitations regarding camp costs. There are several very important calculations. How much would you have to pay to feed, entertain, provide childcare, and so forth, if your child stays home for all or part of a summer? Second, be sure to estimate the extras that are involved in going to camp. Extras may include a camp uniform, charges for trips, transportation, the cost of visiting the camp, and the extra spending money needed by your child. Third, remember that a good camp experience can be a long-term investment that will affect many other areas of your child's life. In other words, don't be too concerned about saving a couple of hundred dollars over the course of the summer. If your child does not have a good experience, you both will have lost far more than you have saved.

- **Size:** Camps may vary in size from under 10 campers to more than 400. Smaller camps may foster a very special environment where campers and staff really get to know each other, and where individual needs can be quickly met. Large camps are often organized into small units thus making it possible to receive the same kind of attention offered by a smaller camp. In a good camp there may be little correlation between size and the quality of the total camp experience.
- **Location:** Many parents needlessly limit their search for a camp by looking in one state or by choosing an arbitrary distance from home. More important than distance, are the related questions involving camp environment, security, medical facilities or location relevant to medical facilities, and accessibility. Keep in mind that there are excellent camps in many states, and that if your child is having a good experience, distance will not make a great deal of difference.
- **Safety:** Not all camps have the same ideas of safety when it comes to your child. It is nice to believe that there would be general guidelines for safety for all camps to follow but that is not the case. When looking at camps which have equestrian services, camps which are not specialty camps may not have the same safety guidelines and precautions as those which are specialty camps. Specialty equestrian camps typically are held at riding schools where stringent rules and safety precautions are in place on a daily basis throughout the year. They are typically taught by an instructor who teaches throughout the year and is very familiar with the horses, equipment, and the process of working at that farm in all types of conditions. When asking questions regarding safety, here are some general questions to follow:
  1. Do you require helmets while riding? On the ground? At other times?
  2. What clothing requirements for campers are there?
  3. What safety precautions do you take? Camps which are also riding schools have safety guidelines which they follow daily year round.
  4. How do you match up horses to riders?
  5. What do your horses do the rest of the year? You want to hear answers such as lesson or show horses for the remainder of the year. You do not want to hear that they sit in a pasture for the rest of the year or are not ridden the rest of the year. The more frequently horses are used for riding the better they will be for camps. Horses that are lesson horses for most of the year for beginner riders (or whatever level your child is) is the optimal answer for this question.
  6. What do you do in the case of an emergency? This includes falls, ground accidents, weather, etc. You need to make sure that the camp has a plan and that they implement it. A camp which does have a plan will be quick to answer this question and know what they are talking about. A camp which does not have a plan will stumble around answering this question.
- **Certifications:** Camps may or may not be a certified camp. There are several different associations which certifications can be “bought” from rather than being awarded due to meeting certain requirements. This is the reason that many camps do not have certifications. The most important thing when looking at an Equestrian Camp is the instructor(s). Certifications again can be “bought” rather than being earned through proving themselves as an instructor. Look for experience rather than certifications. Instructors of equestrian camps should have several years of teaching experience and be professional in their appearance, manner, people skills, and teaching. Awards and honors are pluses to instructors.
- **Insurance:** Camps should have a large policy to cover any accidents which may occur due to any reason. Many horse farms do not have insurance and simply carry on with a hope and a prayer that nothing will happen at their farm. Ask the camp if they have insurance and what type of insurance that they have. You should NEVER rely on the camp or farm’s insurance to pay your claims. You **SHOULD ALWAYS CARRY FULL INSURANCE** on your child including medical (make sure to send copies of their insurance cards with them) and for their belongings. It is common at camps and farms for items to be misplaced to where they do not get put back into their place, and full insurance will help cover those items. Your Homeowner’s policy may or may not cover the loss or theft of items. Also, you **SHOULD MAKE SURE TO DOUBLE CHECK ALL OF YOUR CHILD’S INSURANCE** that it covers horse, animal, and farm related incidents. Many insurance companies **DO NOT** cover incidents arising from these things or from a person’s presence around these things.
- **Programs & Activities:** Camps have all kinds of program offerings. Some camps may emphasize one activity while others will offer a wide array of programs. Camps in which a camper would devote a majority of his or her time to one activity are often referred to as Specialty Camps. In these camps, staff and facilities are geared to provide an intensive experience in a single area such as horseback riding. Naturally, these camps have other facilities and activities that provide campers with additional

experiences. Equestrian camps are primarily specialty camps which offer little or no other activities, and any activities which may be offered will probably be horse based.

- **Special Needs:** There are other special considerations, some examples of which are listed below. Most equestrian specialty camps will not offer many accommodations for special needs as listed here. If you have the need for accommodation in one of these areas or one that is not listed, make sure to discuss your specific needs with the camp and find out prior to booking if they will be able to meet the needs of your child.
  1. Weight Loss
  2. Kosher Food
  3. Vegetarian
  4. Special Diet
  5. Learning Disabled
  6. Attention Deficit Disorder
  7. Non-English Speaking
  8. Physically Disabled

With this information and your homework, you should be able to identify those camps which appear promising in terms of meeting your specifications. Once you have condensed your list of camps, review the brochures and videos with your child. Don't feel self-conscious about asking lots of questions. A good camp will have paid a lot of attention to these parental concerns and should be eager to respond to them. Involve your child in the selection process. Finally, ask for references of families who have had their child attend the camp. Speaking with these families can give you valuable insight about the camp and the families that send their children there.

After you have decided on which camp you will be attending there are a few more things which you need to do and to take into consideration. They include:

- **Medical/Personal Insurance:** As covered above, your child's insurance needs to be checked to make sure that it covers any incidents occurring from whatever situation that they might be in. Purchase additional insurance if needed just in case. NEVER rely on a camp or farm's insurance paying for an accident, injury, or death of your child. Equestrian activities are highly dangerous, but riding in a car is as well, so make sure that you, your child, and your belongings going along to camp are covered in full.
- **Camp Insurance:** Camps are expensive regardless of what type or how long the camp lasts or even how close to home that they are. There is now a camp insurance being offered from [www.mycampprotector.com](http://www.mycampprotector.com). The rates are reasonable and offer your camp investment some protection. Make sure to check the insurance out thoroughly before purchasing it.
- **Registration:** Camps should have a registration form of some sort for you to fill out. This may be as little as your name and contact information or multiple pages in length. Make sure to read the fine print and know if and how you are able to get a refund in the case of something occurring. Pay special attention to the due date for registration forms. Most camps run on a first come first served basis meaning that the postage date on paid in full (or how much the registration requires) are placed into a camp slot first. Once the slots are filled, that session is closed. Know the guidelines for how registration works at the camp that you plan on attending.
- **Paperwork:** Camps will also usually have additional paperwork. This might include a release of liability form even if the camp is not an Equestrian Specialty Camp, and if it is an Equestrian Specialty Camp, there might also be barn rules/guidelines, riding history, and further paperwork to establish the experience level of your child while making you aware of what is expected at the camp or farm all while releasing the camp or farm from all claims and liability. Even if you do not have a release of liability form to sign, most states have a statute of some sorts which is a release of liability for Equine Professionals which is generally the same concept but offers additional coverage for them with participants in equine activities.
- **Horse (if applicable):** Some camps may allow you to bring your own horse if you have one. Sometimes this is a good idea and sometimes it is not. If you are not going to learn anything on your own horse, then do not bring it. The main reason to not bring your own horse is if the camp for example is a Hunter/Jumper camp and your horse is a Western Pleasure horse. A week or however long the camp is does not give your horse a fair chance of having enough time to learn a new discipline in new

surroundings with new trainers/instructors. Your child's safety is the number one priority for you and should be the number one priority for everyone at the camp. Your child's current riding instructor or trainer will be able to assist you with this decision if you are unsure of what you should do. Most camps will allow you to bring your own horse if it is suitable for the camp program, if it is healthy and disease free, if it is in the proper condition to handle the length of the camp and the stress of the camp, if it has manners around other horses and strange people, and if you are willing to pay the additional cost of bringing the horse if it is not included in the camp price. If you decide to bring your own horse, then you will need to make a packing list for the horse in addition to your child. Ask the camp director, stable manager, or head wrangler for advice on what you should bring particularly if the camp is in a different geographical region. Every item that you bring for your horse (even hoof picks) should be labeled with your child's name at a minimum, but including the horse's name as well will be useful.

- **Packing List:** Camps may offer a generic packing list of what you should and should not bring to camp. Some camps are firm on the items which they do not allow at camp. Use common sense when developing your packing list. Leave expensive items at home unless they are 100% absolutely needed and will be 100% safe and secure at the camp. Some camps nowadays do not allow cellular phones or laptops. They have telephones and computers with internet access for the campers to use at their convenience during allowed times. If in doubt leave it at home is a good rule of thumb to live by. Again, if you bring your own horse to camp, you will need a packing list for your horse in addition to one for your child. If you have questions in regards to what you should or should not pack, asking the camp is a great idea, but even better is asking campers and their parents who have attended the camp before.
- **First Day:** The first day of camp is an exciting adventure even if it is a day camp a mile from your house. Your child will stay busy meeting new people and learning the ropes of the camp. It is very important that you print off the schedule of the camp so that you know what will be happening at the camp. The most important thing to know is what time the drop off time is. You do not want to be late on the first day, but you also do not want to be early. Camps do not appreciate children being dropped off 30 minutes early, much less an hour or more early, to the camp unless you have asked for permission to do so. Some camps offer an early drop off service for an additional cost. Please remember that camp staff must be paid and if you need to drop off your child an hour before their start time for work, they must be paid for that hour. If the camp is a day camp, it is equally important to know the pick up time. Most camps will charge you dearly for every minute past the pick up time that you are late to get your child. Some camps will offer a late pick up service or even a shuttle drop off service (possibly a pick up service in the morning too) for an additional charge. Again, camp staff must have their labor paid for and you should not expect for these services to be free. Camps will not usually have a problem with you picking up your child a few minutes early (up to 15 minutes is considered normal) but be aware that you might have to wait on them to be released if they are not done with their work or taking care of their horse for the camp. If you need to pick up your child more than 15 minutes ahead of time, make sure to let the camp know as soon as you know that you will need to do this, remind them the day before, and then remind them again when you drop off your child that morning. Some camps are fine with you picking up your child in the middle of the camp day and returning the child afterwards if they have a doctor's appointment or similar reason.
- **Remainder of Camp:** Camps will usually keep the same schedule for every day of camp in order to give the campers stability in their day. If it is a day camp, make sure that you continue to drop off and pick up at the correct times. If the camp is residential, then make sure that you call during available hours to speak to your child or email if they will have access to the internet via one of the camp's computers. If you are unable to call the camp to reach your child, make yourself available by keeping your cellular phone with you or by being at home to receive their call during their allowed personal time. The general rule of thumb with camps and when your children are away from you is that no news is good news. If your child is having the time of their life, they may actually forget to call home. It happens many times. Just put yourself in their shoes and think of the fun that you would be having and it will be easy for you to understand.
- **Thank You's:** The one thing that is forgotten most in our society these days are thank you's. The camp and camp staff is appreciative of you and your child experiencing part of their summer and lives with them. But, your child should also be appreciative. Camp staff, instructors, and trainers are underpaid and a simple thank you from your child is the best pay that can be offered. Equestrians become professionals as instructors and trainers for the joy of doing it and not for the money. A thank you here and there keeps them all going. Remember to have your child write a thank you card for the camp, which will help them with their writing skills in this age of computers and technology. A testimonial letter from you, if your child had a great time is a wonderful way to help the camp for future campers.