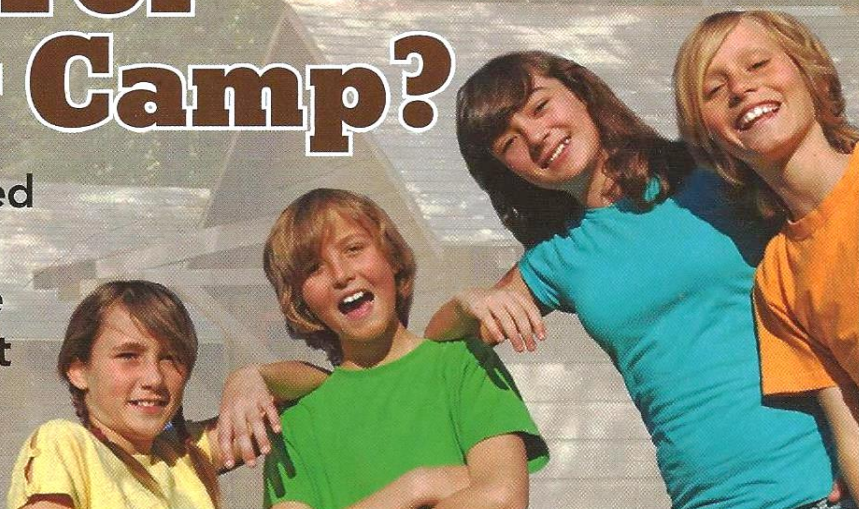


# Too Old For Summer Camp?

Your middle-school-aged kids may be ready to stay at home over the summer, but does that mean they should?

BY SARA G. STEPHENS



**A**mong its many splendors, spring brings a load of activities that make the winter holidays look like child's play. Besides spring break, Easter celebrations, and spring cleaning, summer planning assumes a prominent place on every family's seasonal to-do-list. For many families, the issue of summer camp quickly reaches the discussion table. And for those families with middle-school-aged kids, the conversation often meets with the possibility that children of this age might not require a structured, supervised activity to occupy the hours normally occupied by school. Kids will argue, "I'm old enough to stay at home by myself," and parents might secretly agree, helplessly encouraged by the sometimes prohibitive costs of many summer programs.

Tucked away behind closed doors, Mom and Dad debate the issue: "Why *should* we send our middle-school-aged kids to summer camp?" The case may be more clearly decided by considering the alternative: "What will our middle-schoolers be doing if they do *not* go to summer camp?"

## They Will Be Falling Behind

Students lose the equivalent of at least one month of school instruction over the summer months, according to a 1996 study conducted by summer-learning expert, Harris Cooper. The phenomenon is referred to as 'learning loss.' In short, the Cooper study revealed that children's tests scores were at least one month lower when they returned to school in the fall than scores were when students left school in the spring. Because long summer vacations disrupt the routine flow of instruction, kids forget things they've learned over the course of the school year. As a result, educators spend a good portion of the fall semester reviewing material from the previous year.

In the Cooper study, math facts and spelling suffered more than other areas tested, mostly because math computation and spelling rely on the acquisition of factual and procedural knowledge. Other subjects, like reading comprehension and problem solving, are more conceptual in nature. Also, kids are more likely to practice reading skills at home than they are to practice their math, contributing to a greater overall loss of learning in the area of math than in reading.

Houston families have access to a wealth of academic summer camps specializing in fun, creative instruction of a diverse range of subjects. One CSI camp offered through Raising the Bar Creative concepts, aims to teach math and science principle in a crime-scene-investigation environment. There are camps that fit every child's personality. Just do your homework and you and your child will be very satisfied.

Economically disadvantaged children run the risk of falling increasingly farther behind the academic curve every year when compared to their more privileged counterparts, who have the option of attending summer-based enrichment programs. "The long summer vacation just exacerbates the inequities that already exist beyond the schoolhouse doors," says a report published by John Hopkins University.

Opportunities do exist for this class of student. Many public libraries offer free summer programs, and a growing number of program providers have partnered with schools to provide summer activities for free or very affordable prices.

## They Will be Getting Lazy and Depressed

When there's nothing else to do, kids (and many, adults, let's face it), quickly gravitate toward the comfort of the couch, the unconditional acceptance of television, and the tantalizing temptation of the computer. In small doses, these distractions may be acceptable, but if summer schedules get too lax, these "activities" enlist kids as card-carrying members of the couch-potato society. This membership comes at a high price.

The last 30 years has seen a tripling in the number of children who are overweight, according to [www.helpcurechildobesity.com](http://www.helpcurechildobesity.com). The study concludes that "one-third of the nation's children are carrying too much weight."

A child who is overweight suffers an increased risk of not only a physical nature (high cholesterol, hypertension, respiratory ailments, and orthopedic problems, and type 2 diabetes), but also an emotional nature, with marked tendencies toward depression, according to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Getting kids involved in an athletic-based summer camp helps move them away from the clear dangers of a sedentary summer. The rush of hormones and chemicals produced from physical activity promotes positive feelings. Even programs that are not athletic in nature present a routine and source of entertainment to ward off the emotional and behavioral sand traps of unsupervised, unfocused summer months.

## They Will be Getting into Trouble

It's a well-known, if not well-heeded, warning: "Idle hands are the devil's playground." More than a wives' tale, the ominous proverb meets with statistical truth, and the hands of middle-school-aged children are no exception.



Juveniles are committing more crimes at an earlier age, and they are being arrested for more serious crimes than ever before, according to Corrections Policy Analyst Joel Rosch, Ph.D., in his study, *Understanding Juvenile Crime Trends: What Can and Cannot be Done About Them*. Rosch's research indicates that during the scope of his study, arrests for robbery, murder, drugs and weapon violations showed a steep increase in the pattern of arrests among youth before they reach the age of 16. He also points to an increase in the number of younger children abusing drugs and alcohol.

"We need to provide juveniles with more, not less, adult supervision," Rosch asserts. "Since most juvenile crime happens after school, between 2:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., we need to increase after school programs...that keep juveniles in a learning environment, teach important social skills and limit unsupervised time on the street."

Barry A. Garst, Ph.D., Director of Research Application for the American Camp Association, agrees with the recommendation. "Teens take risks to assert their independence," he says, adding that combining this tendency with the opportunity offered by stretches of unsupervised time can create just the right mix for some bad behavior. Garst suggests that risk-taking camps provide a venue for kids channeling their affinity for risk tendency towards positive risk-taking, rather than negative risk taking, such as drugs, drinking, and driving.

## The Power of Summer Camp

Franklin D. Roosevelt called summer camps "America's greatest contribution to the world." Send your middle-schoolers to summer camp and know that instead of falling academically behind, they will be immersing themselves in their favorite subjects, or conquering the subjects with which they've struggled, so they can start the fall semester with confidence and enthusiasm; instead of getting lazy and depressed, they will be recharging

their souls and discovering skills and muscles they never knew they had; instead of getting into trouble, they will be learning the power of service, self-reliance, and leadership.

Like the song says, "to everything, there is a season." So for every child there is a summer camp. Consider your child's age and interests, type them into your favorite search engine, and get ready to register. Don't put it off, as the popular camps fill more quickly than you can imagine. And don't think for a minute your middle-schoolers are past their summer-camp years. Unless they have outgrown learning, developing, being healthy, having fun, and making friends, they have many summers of camp left in them.

## TWO PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

### RENEE AND CHILD, SOPHIA:

Houstonian mom Renee E. says her 10-year-old daughter Sophia never resisted signing up for summer camp. This year, she's excited as ever about spending the summer months exploring new frontiers. "Summer is a great opportunity, especially at this age," Renee says. "We view it is a chance for Sophia to explore new interests she's been thinking about during the school year."

"We believe in a lot of play," she says, "but for kids, three months is a lot of time to spend not reading. Math, especially, is something you want to continue doing year round." Renee, who has homeschooled Sophia up until this year, has witnessed firsthand, from both a teacher's and a parent's perspective, the learning loss kids can suffer over summer months. Her solution is to "mix it up" by registering Sophia for one academic program and one special-interest program.

Last year, Sophia enrolled in an algebra camp offered through Raising the Bar Creative Concepts. She also sings in the children's choir with the

### CYNTHIA H. AND CHILDREN, SHAUN AND MICHELLE:

"Neither of my children resisted going to camp," Cynthia says. "They both liked the outdoors, so I sent them to camp in elementary school." It was a bad experience. "Shaun said there were a lot of kids there who tended to be bullies and weren't at camp for the right reason," Cynthia says. Both kids enjoyed band and attended band camp in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. "Since my husband and I are UT exes, we wanted them to experience being on the UT campus, so [Longhorn Band Camp at the University of Texas in Austin] was a natural choice," Cynthia says. "Both of them enjoyed this camp a great deal," Cynthia says, mostly because they were around other kids who liked music and wanted to perfect their performance on their instruments. "There were many social activities as well," Cynthia says. "Shaun still has a good friend dating from this sixth grade camp experience."

Both kids were Altar Servers, and they attended camp at Lake Medina. Shaun was in the seventh grade and Michelle was in the sixth grade. "Both of them enjoyed this camp because there were a lot of activities, and they were there with their friends--other altar servers," Cynthia says.

Shaun was a Boy Scout and attended three boy scout camps in middle school, one in Texas, and two in New Mexico. "He thoroughly enjoyed each of these camps and used these experiences to eventually qualify to become an Eagle Scout," Cynthia says.

### Cynthia's Advice

Cynthia's advice comes from her kids. "Choose a camp that focuses on something the child has an interest in," she says. "If the camp doesn't have a particular focus, children generally have a better experience if they attend camp with friends."

Houston Grand Opera, belongs to a travel choir, and attended singing camp. This summer she might explore a photography class.

### Advice from Renee:

**1. The important thing is balance.** You can't take summer away from kids. My advice is to present summer enrichment programs like this, 'I don't want you to lose these skills over the summer, so would you mind sandwiching this math course between your other summer camps?'

**2. Early spring is the time to sign up for the summer camps you really want.** "Start finding [your kid's] interest right now," Renee says. "If your child likes robotics, get online and Google 'robotics' and 'summer camps.' You'll be amazed at the number of program options you find."

**3. Popular summer camps fill up fast.** Renee learned this lesson the hard way. Sophia was bubbling with excitement when she learned of a new camp based around the Percy Jackson book series. The family was in Washington, D.C., at a hotel, and registration for the camp opened at midnight. Renee's husband offered to use the hotel's office facilities to fax Sophia's registration promptly at midnight. At 4 am, he was just making his way to the lobby, quite sure that Sophia's seat would be safe. The camp had already sold out.

**4. Look into refund policies.** You're more apt to act quickly on a particular camp's registration if you know you can be refunded your money or a portion of it. "It's worth grabbing that spot when you find it, if a change in plans means you're only going to out \$50," Renee says.

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