

# Start Looking, Start Booking!

Summer Camps and Family Decisions

by Libby Carty McNamee

Do you want the camp to foster specific interests or provide academic support or stimulation for your child? Should it be a day camp or overnight? Is camp going to serve as a substitute for traditional childcare during the summer months? How much do you want to spend on camp tuitions?

Once you have some of these answers, the The American Camps Association's (ACA) Find-A-Camp Database at [www.acacamps.org](http://www.acacamps.org) is a good place to begin your search. The ACA provides an organized list of camps that meet over 300 established industry and government standards on food service, health and wellness, transportation, program design, and other relevant criteria. The website also offers valuable tips on how to search for just the right camp in your area.

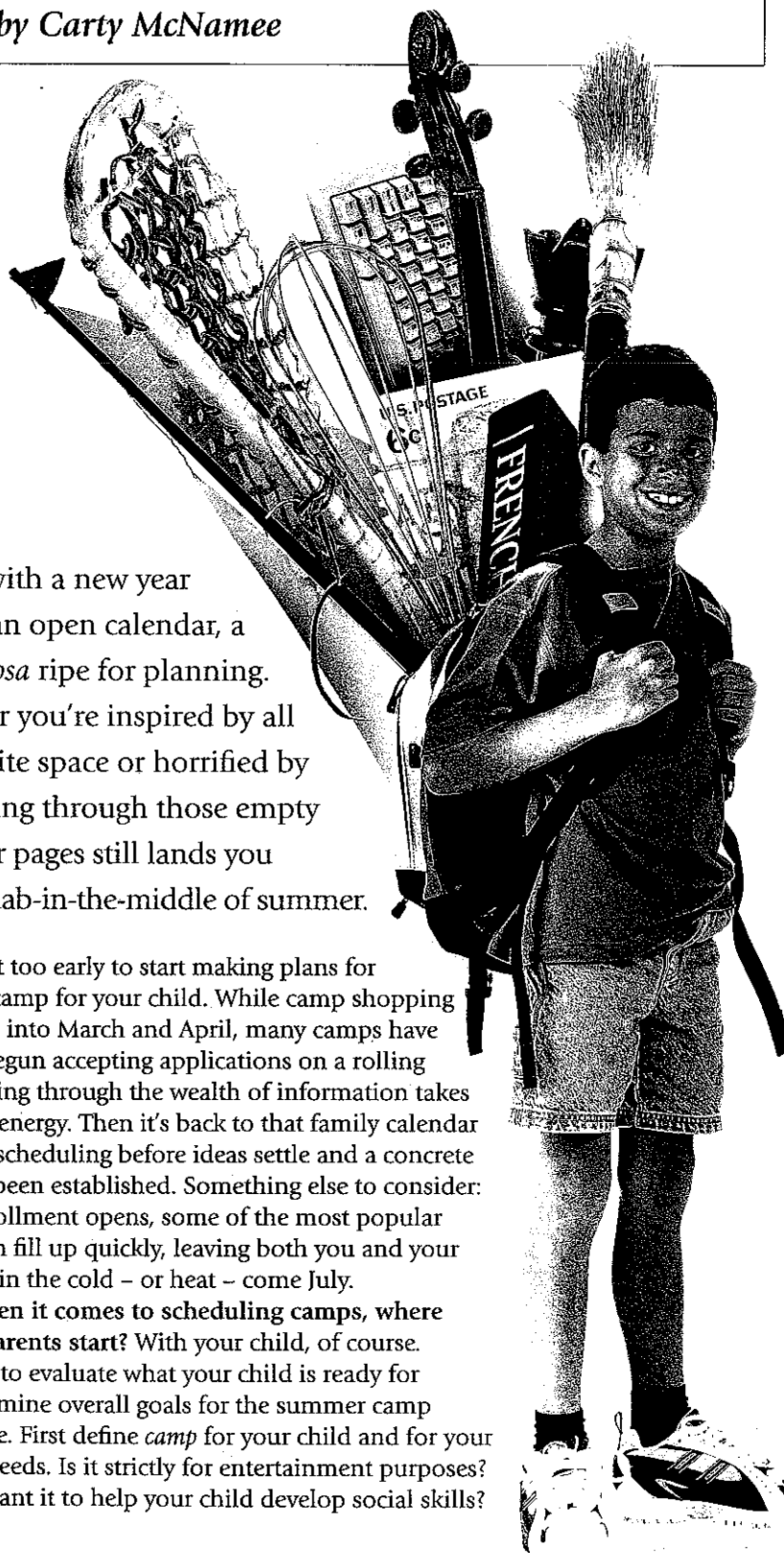
Monica Nichols, a full-time working mother of three, has relied on a variety of camps over the years to keep her daughters busy and stimulated throughout the summer. "It's definitely tough to plan for the whole summer. It's a challenge to try to lay everything out and find camps that the kids really want to attend. We specifically look for camps that are not like a daycare and are both challenging and interesting for the girls." One of Richmond's most popular camps, *Cat's CAP*, is a longtime family favorite.

Formally known as *St. Catherine's Creative Arts Program*, *Cat's CAP* is a co-ed summer day camp for children ages 3½ through rising tenth graders. The program focuses on visual and performing arts along with physical education, outdoor activities, cooking, and foreign languages. According to another local mother, Jane Lee O'Connell, once the kids are in second grade, they can select their own classes from an interesting assortment. "They offer a half-day program, a full day, and extended day care."

Along with a new year comes an open calendar, a *tabula rosa* ripe for planning. Whether you're inspired by all that white space or horrified by it, flipping through those empty calendar pages still lands you smack-dab-in-the-middle of summer.

It's not too early to start making plans for summer camp for your child. While camp shopping continues into March and April, many camps have already begun accepting applications on a rolling basis. Sifting through the wealth of information takes time and energy. Then it's back to that family calendar for more scheduling before ideas settle and a concrete plan has been established. Something else to consider: Once enrollment opens, some of the most popular camps can fill up quickly, leaving both you and your child out in the cold – or heat – come July.

So when it comes to scheduling camps, where should parents start? With your child, of course. You need to evaluate what your child is ready for and determine overall goals for the summer camp experience. First define *camp* for your child and for your family's needs. Is it strictly for entertainment purposes? Do you want it to help your child develop social skills?



Even though I work part-time, I use the camp for childcare purposes, and I find it very worth the money."

*Peak Experiences*, a local indoor rock climbing center, offers the tremendously popular week-long day camp, *Passages Adventure Camp*, located on Belle Island which teaches kids ages 8 to 15 how to kayak on the James River, rock climb, and use zip lines. Local camper Judith Amateau, age 13, attended for three summers in a row and "loved every minute of it," from the motivated and enthusiastic counselors to the chance to get muddy and learn about the river by actually being in it.

Overnight camp can be a wonderful opportunity for an older child to develop self-confidence. Last summer Judith attended *Vershire Riding School Children's Camp* in Vermont for the first time and ended up surprising herself. "I thought I would be really nervous to be away from home for a week, but I wasn't. I was sad to leave."

For parents first considering overnight camps, the thought of letting go of your child for more than a day can be unsettling. Karen Beebe, mother of three boys, ages 7, 11, and 13, recommends choosing a camp with an established record. Her two oldest sons have attended *Camp Willow Run*, an interdenominational Christian camp on Lake Gaston. "They have a great group of counselors and a director who has been there forever. You recognize the faces each summer, and you know they have your child's best interests at heart."

Designed around a railroad theme, the children are housed in converted boxcars overlooking the lake. Beyond the unique aesthetics, *Camp Willow Run* offers a menu of activities including swimming, water skiing, fishing, and canoeing.

Closer to home, *My Gym* offers summer camp sessions for potty-trained toddlers up to age 9, open

rain or shine. Local mother Sarah Hebert raves, "It gives the kids a wonderful exposure to various ages and an opportunity to learn socialization skills. Each camp session has a unique theme, so you can sign up for as few or as many sessions as you would like."

Another resource worth investigating for the five and under set is your favorite area pre-school. Many pre-schools schedule week-long, half-day themed camps for early summer before the public and private schools dismiss in mid-June.

There are a myriad of camps in the area from which to choose: camps for history buffs, theatre and drama camps, sports camps for all ages and skill levels, math and science camps, foreign language camps, computer camps, art camps. Many camps are privately owned and operated, but the county Parks and Recreation Departments also offer a wide variety of reasonably priced camps.

While final camp decisions ultimately depend on the individual, one thing is clear for all children: Camp choices need reassessment over the years as your child grows and your family's needs change. It's tempting to stick with the same routine summer after summer, but it is not always in your child's or your family's best interests.

*Libby Carty McNamee is a local freelance writer and attorney whose fondest memories from childhood include attending a Girl Scout sailing camp on Martha's Vineyard. She lives in Midlothian with her husband and son, Sam, 18 months.*

For more information on specific camp options in the area, please refer to our comprehensive directory of camps at:  
[allaboutkidsmagazine.com](http://allaboutkidsmagazine.com)



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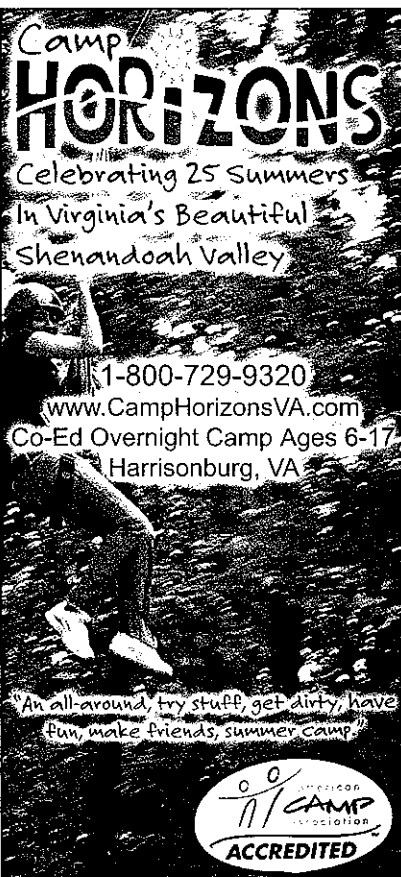
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