

# Don't send your kids to camp; go with them

Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY 5:47 p.m. EDT July 12, 2013



(Photo: Elizabeth Weise)

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At 39, Maia Hendel might seem a tad old to be heading off to camp. But she has been practicing camp songs and thinking about canoe trips right alongside her sons and husband. They're all eagerly preparing for "family camp" on Aug. 3.

Such sleep-away camps for adults and kids alike are part of a growing vacation trend. Like most camps, they generally feature the great outdoors, simple accommodations and a dining hall. But they uniquely give grown-ups and children time to commune with one another as well as nature, while leaving cellphones, computers and the Internet at home in exchange for true family time.

Family camps grew 11% over the past four years and really took off about a decade ago, says Tish Bolger, president of the American Camp Association in Martinsville, Ind. She estimates that today, there are about 700 family camps within the association, out of 7,000 overnight camps and 5,000 day camps.

They come in many flavors: religious camps, camps for families with adopted children from abroad, camps for families who speak specific languages, camps for families with disabled kids and camps for alumni of specific universities. What links them is that they provide a place where families can "unplug and then plug into each other," Bolger says.

The Hendels are heading to Camp du Nord, a YMCA camp in Ely, Minn. After a six-hour drive from their home in Mendota Heights, Minn., they'll park the car and not touch it again for a week.

"They talk about it all year," Hendel says of sons Quinn, 7, and Wesley, 5. "They love the freedom of just being able to go out the cabin door and run around and say, 'Oh, we'll meet you at the dining hall.'"

There are organized activities in the mornings for children, but the focus is making time for families to be outdoors together. "If you would rather just take a canoe ride with your family than go to an organized singalong, it's fine," Hendel says.



Sheldon Medicoff, 47, jumps off a rock into the Tuolumne River after a hike from Camp Mather. (Photo: Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY)

## A country getaway

Family camps also offer an alternative for parents who aren't ready to let their kids go off for a week or two on their own at sleep-away camp. "It doesn't get better than actually going to camp with your kids if you're the type of parent who hovers," says syndicated newspaper columnist April Masini, who writes about families.

Traditional sleep-away camps also have embraced the trend. Many now offer a week or two of family camp each summer, Bolger says, providing the opportunity for "a first-time camper's parent to experience camp with their children before letting them explore it on their own."

Many cities, especially in California, run family camps, too, to give urban families a chance to unwind in the fresh air. Berkeley, Oakland, Sacramento, San Jose and Stockton all own camps.

San Francisco's is called Camp Mather, and every summer since my children were toddlers, we've spent a week there, just at the edge of Yosemite National Park (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/destinations/2013/06/14/yosemite-national-park-majestic-peaks-valleys-for-any-visitor/2425003/>). Established in 1924, Mather is pretty basic. Accommodations consist of plywood cabins with one electric light, one outlet, a dresser and plastic mattresses on cots. There's a separate bathhouse with showers and toilets, and we bring our own bedding and towels.

Mather provides three meals a day at the dining hall, a pool with lifeguards, a soccer/baseball field for pickup games, ping-pong tables, a tennis court, badminton, a lake to swim in, a sand beach to build sandcastles on and hikes galore.



A post-breakfast ping pong game at Camp Mather. (Photo: Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY)

What it lacks is what we love most — no cellphone service and no Internet access. Parents slow down and kids rev up into the kind of old-fashioned childhood that's all too rare these days. Every year, we spread out a puzzle on the picnic table outside our cabin, and people stop by to chat and work on it awhile. Inside the cabin, we enjoy raucous card games.

At Camp Mather, our city kids, ages 10 and 12, blossom in ways they can't at home, where cars make biking on their own impossible and where the thought of letting them wander at will is hard to imagine.

Other families feel the same. Being at Mather gives Anna Livesey's two children "independence and freedom, which they don't get enough of in the city," says the stay-at-home mother, who's on her second visit here. The camp feels like a large, extended family, she says. "We don't know everyone, but I still feel safe letting my 8-year-old be MIA."

Horseshoe games fill the late-afternoon stillness. There's always a staff vs. camper baseball game, and on Friday night, there's a dance. It hasn't

changed much over the years, says Bob Mahoney, 65, a retired San Francisco police officer. "We've been coming here since the 1970s. We came when our kids were little, now we come when our grandkids come."

Reservations are by an online lottery, and about 5,000 lucky San Franciscans attend one of 11 week-long summer sessions. "It's the luck of the draw who gets in," says camp manager Mike Cunnane. Mather is also a relatively cheap vacation: A week in a four-person cabin with all meals included is just \$362 each.

### 'Just enjoy each other'

Not every family longs for a week of total togetherness, says columnist Masini. "There are still plenty of parents counting down until (regular) overnight camp starts."

But for many parents whose daily lives whiz by in a whirl, family camp is a time to simply be. Katie Olson, her husband, three children and two other families attend Camp Emandal, near Willits, Calif., together every summer. "We don't have to do errands, we're not trying to catch up on e-mail or cooking or shopping," she says. "It gives you this unfettered week to just enjoy each other."

Shayna van Hoften of Menlo Park, Calif., attends Stanford's alumni camp with her husband and children, though she grew up going to Berkeley's Lair of the Bair. The depth of feeling around family camp can be intense: "I know a couple that negotiated rights to their week as part of a divorce settlement."

A sampling of family camps nationwide:

#### **Camp Mather**

**Where:** Mather, Calif.

**Who:** Run by San Francisco's Recreation and Parks Department

**Cost:** Rustic cabin for a family of four with meals is about \$1,500 per week.

**Info:** [sfrecpark.org/destination/camp-mather](http://sfrecpark.org/destination/camp-mather); 415-831-2715

#### **Camp Brosius**

**Where:** Elkhart Lake, Wis.

**Who:** Run by Indiana University. Originally for IU alumni, now open to all.

**Cost:** A basic cabin for four with meals starts at \$1,820 per week.

**Info:** [petm.iupui.edu/family\\_camp\\_brosius/welcome\\_campers.php](http://petm.iupui.edu/family_camp_brosius/welcome_campers.php); 317-274-0606

#### **Camp du Nord**

**Where:** Ely, Minn.

**Who:** Run by the Twin Cities YMCA

**Cost:** Offers cabins and tent sites. Rustic cabin for a family of four with meals starts at \$2,079 per week.

**Info:** [ymcatwincities.org/camps/camp\\_du\\_nord/summer\\_family\\_camp](http://ymcatwincities.org/camps/camp_du_nord/summer_family_camp); 612-822-2267

#### **Camp Ramah Darom**

**Where:** Clayton, Ga.

**Who:** A Conservative Jewish family camp run by the Ramah Camping Movement

**Cost:** Hotel-style rooms for a family of four cost \$1,350 for four nights.

ramahdarom.org; 404-531-0801

**Camp Rice:** Korean Culture Camp

**Where:** Reistertown, Md.

**Who:** A three-day weekend camp for adoptive families with Korean children run by All Services for International Adoptees and Adoptive Families

**Cost:** Hotel-style rooms with linen service and meals for a family of four cost \$1,320 for two nights.

**Info:** asia-allservices.org/korean-culture-camp.html; 703-999-4206

**Chinese Family Camp**

**Where:** Beckett, Mass.

**Who:** A week-long camp held in August for families from China or with Chinese heritage run by the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association

**Cost:** Cabin and meals for a family of four start at \$1,040 per week.

**Info:** ourcfc.org; 908-392-2617

**K-Kauai Camp**

**Where:** Branson, Missouri

**Who:** A Christian sleep-away camp that also holds family weeks run by Kanakuk Kamps

**Cost:** A Hawaiian-style cabana for a family of four with two bathrooms and meals starts at \$2,640.

**Info:** kanakuk.com/our-kamps/k-kauai-family-kamp; 417-266-3000

**Pine Cove Christian camp**

**Where:** Tyler, Texas.

**Who:** A Christian sleep-away camp

**Cost:** A four-person cabin including meals and activities starts at \$3,078.

**Info:** pinecove.com/family-camps; 877-474-6326CQ

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