FAQ for Summer Camps and Activities

Camps and other summer programs can be great places for gender-expansive youth to assert their authentic sense of self. Because of their flexibility, potential to personalize a young person’s experience, and increased levels of supervision, camps can often provide safe spaces where a child’s gender can be supported more easily than in schools or out and about in the community.

Sometimes, camps or activities are opportunities for gender-expansive kids to see what it’s like to present as another gender outside the home for the first time. They offer an opportunity to “try on” new forms of gender expression or ways to identify and label their gender. If they anticipate a gender change at school in the fall, this can be a dress rehearsal for the process. Camp or other summer activities can be invaluable opportunities for testing the waters before asserting their gender in other parts of their life.

How do I find a camp that will be supportive of my child’s gender?

There are some camps that are specifically designed for transgender, non-binary and other gender-expansive kids, and some that are for LGBTQ kids. You can find a current list of these camps at http://www.transstudent.org/camps.

Of course, most camps are geared toward themes and programs that do not focus on a camper’s gender, so you will need to determine if they are a good fit for your child. Your first step is to talk to the camp administrators about gender diversity and see if you receive a welcoming or defensive response. Most camps won’t have a lot of direct experience in this area, but try to assess their attitude—will they see your child as a problem, or an opportunity for the whole camp community to learn together? Pay attention to your gut reaction to these conversations. If you’re not comfortable in the way camp leadership is responding to the topic, it is a good bet your child will not be comfortable there either.

Questions you may want to ask:
- Has the camp previously had transgender, non-binary, or other gender-expansive campers?
- What are the camp’s overall philosophies about inclusion and acceptance?
- Does the camp have policies that include non-discrimination and bullying? Do those statements include references to sex, gender identity and expression?
- Has the camp participated in any staff training related to gender diversity and youth?
- Are there any transgender or non-binary staff members?
- Are there gender neutral restrooms for campers?
- Will your child be allowed to use the restroom of their choice?
- If there are sports involved, are there co-ed sports teams? Will your child be able to play on the sports team of their choice?
- To what extent are camp activities designed around girl/boy divisions? For example, if the camp hosts “make-up parties” are campers of all genders invited to participate? Does the camp host boy vs. girl competitions?
- What is their stance around disclosure of a child’s gender status with others in the camp community—staff, parents and/or other campers?
- What is the level of privacy for campers changing clothes, using restrooms, or showering?
- If it is a sleepaway camp or has any overnight activities, what are the living arrangements? Will your child be allowed to be in the cabin of their choice?
- If necessary, how will the camp support any medical needs your child may have (access to hormones or blockers, post-surgical care issues, etc.)?

Another feature to consider is whether the camp is a member of the American Camp Association (ACA). As the leading professional organization for camps in the United States, ACA has been a strong advocate for the inclusion of transgender and non-binary youth in the camp experience. One role of the organization is accreditation of camps related to program quality and the health and safety of campers and staff. Member-organizations must provide training related to established standards, practices and procedures. These typically include policies about bullying and other forms of harassment. The presence of such policies, and their related reporting guidelines are an indication of the camp’s commitment to the safety and well being of all campers, especially those who might otherwise be left out. Further, ACA has provided a number of resources, including trainings and articles, specifically focused on the needs of transgender and non-binary youth.

**Do I tell the camp about my child’s gender?**

Some families choose to be completely open with camps and programs about their child’s gender and some don’t share any information at all. Depending upon what documentation you need to register your child, you can think about registering them in accordance with their authentic gender identity. Another approach is to tell only the camp director(s) and ask them not to disclose this private information to staff or campers, or only to select group of individuals. If they are not willing to maintain your child’s privacy, remind them that it is very personal information and they wouldn’t share similarly personal information about another camper. If they are still not willing to maintain your privacy, you and your child will have to decide whether it is worth the trade-off of participating in the camp with some or all camp community members aware of your child’s gender, or whether this may not be a good camp for your child.

**If I am going to share my child’s gender with the camp, what are some ways of doing so and what else do I need to think about beforehand?**

If you do choose to share your child’s gender information, take an open-minded approach with the camp—assume positive intent and partner with them to meet your child’s needs. Proactively speak with the camp leaders about potential issues before they arise, and ask if they are willing to have their staff receive gender training. Consider how you will share info—in person? in writing? Exactly what will you say? Will your child be there? Have resources on hand, including sources for them to receive training.
If I choose to tell the camp about my child’s gender, what’s the best way to make sure my child’s needs will be taken care of at camp?

There are many things to consider when sending your child to camp, such as use of their proper names and pronouns, bathroom use, etc. We’ve created a Gender Support Plan for Camps which is a helpful outline for you and the camp to use together to plan for your child’s camp experience.

Bathrooms are always a good issue to discuss ahead of time. If there aren’t gender neutral bathrooms at camp, there is no reason your child shouldn’t be allowed to use the restroom of their choice. This sometimes makes camp leaders nervous because they are worried about the reaction of other campers and their families. If so, ask them to be specific about the concerns they have and scenarios they imagine playing out. In most cases, they will be issues related to one of three things: the specific behaviors of other campers; the levels of supervision; or the degree to which clear expectations for camper behavior have been set. Remind them that no camper should be seeing another camper’s body in the bathroom and if they are, then they need to be teaching campers about privacy and respect for everyone in bathrooms. This is in fact an opportunity to assess whether restrooms are safe for every child, and to establish expectations accordingly. They shouldn’t require your child to use a special or separate bathroom unless that is what your child wants to do. If that is the case, how will they work to insure it does become stigmatizing? If other campers are uncomfortable sharing a bathroom with your child, the camp should offer the child who is uncomfortable an alternative bathroom.

My child recently made a gender change and wants to return to a camp they attended prior to changing. How do I navigate this?

Many kids have successfully transitioned in their camp communities, just as they have in schools. Being proactive is key to creating a positive experience for your child. We’ve created Planning for Gender Changes at Camp, which provides a helpful outline for planning with your camp ahead of time to make sure any gender changes go smoothly. In consultation with you and your child, the camp should be clear about how they will respond to questions from other campers and their families. They will most likely be unsure about how to do this, and will need very clear language about what they can and cannot say. It is also helpful to have information on hand about gender and youth that the camp can share with families so they can learn more about the topic, without focusing on your particular child.

My child is going to sleepaway camp, or on an overnight trip. How do I navigate sleeping arrangements and other privacy issues?

Your child’s preferences regarding sleeping accommodations should be the starting point for this decision. What is their ideal arrangement? If campers are normally separated based on gender, then advocate for your child to be allowed to room with peers that match their gender identity if they want to. Another alternative is ask the camp to create a mixed gender cabin where your child and some of their friends/allies can stay together. If your child wants another arrangement, ask the camp to honor their request and to think about ways to make sure your child won’t feel left out based on these different arrangements. Under no
circumstances should the camp make your attendance as a chaperone mandatory in order for your child to participate in the sleepaway.

If the camp includes group showers, begin by asking how especially shy or modest kids navigate bathing. Does the camp have any single stall or more private shower facilities that children can use? Would your child’s use of such facility be stigmatizing in some way? Recognizing that a number of campers would likely prefer more privacy while showering, ask the camp to consider creating a schedule to allow those campers to use the shower facilities one at a time.

I found a camp I love, but it doesn’t seem that they know much about gender. Can I still send my child?

Yes. The fact of the matter is most camps will be unfamiliar with these issues. As long as they demonstrate an openness to your child’s true sense of self, a desire to build their own capacity to support them, and are willing to plan ahead with you (see the Gender Support Plan for Camps), it can potentially be a great camp for your child. Ideally, they will be open to training their whole staff about gender diversity.

Can I send my child to a single-sex camp?

Just as transgender girls are allowed in the Girl Scouts and transgender youth are increasingly attending single-sex schools, there is no reason your child shouldn’t attend a single-sex camp that aligns with their gender identity. Of course, you will have to make privacy decisions, as discussed above, about whether your child will be public or private about their gender at camp. Single-sex camps may be more reluctant to allow your child to participate, but it just depends upon the camp. Follow the same guidelines as for any camp--ask questions ahead of time to determine if they are open to your child attending and whether you feel your child would have a positive experience at the camp; prepare ahead of time with camp leaders and staff to make sure your child’s needs will be met; and see if they are open to training their staff about gender diversity.

Remember, just because your child is gender-expansive doesn’t mean they can’t enjoy all that summer camps and activities have to offer!