



**“I first came to VAMPY purely for the academics. I went in thinking, ‘I’m going to take a class and be done with it.’ Then I got here, and I realized I was making friendships that were going to last a lifetime. It was so life-changing for me. I’ve been allowed to be so open, to find myself, and to really express who I truly am.”**

*Coleman Reed, VAMPY camper 2016-2019*

# Making Choices for Summer Programming

*By Julia Link Roberts, Ed.D., Tyler Clark, Ed.D., Matthew C. Makel, Ph.D., and Mary A. Pei*

**D**o you have a high-ability child who is very interested in genetics and seeks out new ways to learn more about this topic? Maybe you have a child who enjoys mathematics and wants to move more quickly through the material than the pacing in school allows. Perhaps your child is underachieving or not very interested in school and needs a motivation boost. These students may find their interests outside the norm for the academic opportunities available in school and may have few, if any, peers with similar interests.

Summer programs for high-ability students offer a special way to help your child delve deeply into topics of interest or explore new topics in the company of like-minded peers. Along the way, children and young people make friends in summer programming, often “idea-mates” who become lifelong friends.

Gains for summer campers are twofold with students often first attending these programs for academic enrichment/acceleration and returning to summer programming for the social aspects and idea-mates they make. Both areas for growth are very important for children and young people, well worth any difficulty making a decision about the right summer experience for your child.

Multiple programs are offered across the U.S. for students to continue learning during the summer. The process of selecting a summer program that is the right fit for your child can be daunting, as there are many considerations—including academic and social-emotional components.



**“It was undoubtedly one of my most influential experiences growing up. The summers I spent at camp allowed me to confidently form my own identity, and the values I learned are some that I still carry with me to this day.”**

*Lauren Simon, SCATS 2013, VAMPY camper 2014-17, camp counselor 2021*

### **Academic Expectations**

One of the primary reasons for choosing to have your child attend a summer program is academics. The goals and opportunities offered differ by program. For example, some summer programs provide students with an opportunity to focus their attention on a single topic such as robotics or environmental law. These programs allow students to go in depth into that topic to learn as much as they can during the summer. Others provide students with multiple opportunities to pursue a variety of topics. For example, the Center for Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University offers two summer camp options: one program where gifted middle school students take four classes each day for two weeks or one where students can take one class each day for three weeks, with a deep dive on specific topic of interest. Regardless of the specific content area, common themes for these summer programs are to provide appropriate academic challenge and enable students to pursue academic interests.

Because of their talents, some students may often be under-challenged in school. Summer programs specifically seek to match students with similar peers, which allows the learning opportunities offered to be specifically targeted to challenge and engage them. For some students, a summer program is the first time they meet and learn with students who are like them. Being challenged academically can be a new experience for students who have found school to be easy. Learning at higher levels in a summer program is an enjoyable, low-stakes opportunity to experience what it feels like to be academically challenged.

School-based gifted programming is often tied to state learning standards or provided for only a short period of time each day or

week. Summer programs give students an opportunity to pursue their passions all day, typically for several days or even weeks. This opportunity allows students to immerse themselves in topics that are interesting and exciting to them. It also means that the other students who are there with them share that excitement. This immersion can create a learning environment that feels different from school. In summer programs, gifted students are the target audience, which open up engaging experiences for the campers.

The academic portion of each camp may be focused in one of several ways. The day may be organized with a problem-solving theme focusing on a real-world, current problem. The academics may be interdisciplinary with all classes tied to a universal theme, like patterns or systems, with each class tying into the theme. The academic day may be devoted to one topic or content area. Possibilities include a science course like physics or chemistry or a humanities focus, which could be art or issues in the humanities.

There is a growing body of evidence showing that educational opportunities like summer programs play a meaningful role in helping gifted children develop and achieve greater educational, occupational, and creative accomplishments in adulthood.<sup>1</sup> This combination of matching the learning environment to student learning needs and allowing students to pursue topics aligned with their talents and interests may be an important factor when selecting a summer program.

### **Social and Emotional Development Expectations**

While academics are important to summer programming for gifted students, social and emotional development is just as important. When choosing a summer program that is the right

## How to Choose the Right Summer Program for Your Child

Choosing the right summer programming for your child can be a challenge but considering a few key points during the selection process can help ensure a fit that is as smooth as possible. Below are some questions to ask when choosing a summer camp for your gifted child.

- 1. What education experiences are offered?** Think about whether your child is interested in exploring multiple interests during the program or going more in depth in one particular area. A student with multiple interests may become frustrated or bored with a program that focuses on just one area. Alternately, if your child is very interested in a specific area—mathematics, for example—you want to make sure the program offers experiences in that area. For students who really enjoy math, taking this course for six hours per day for three weeks would be an enriching experience.

### CHOOSE YOUR EXPERIENCE

- Art
- Drama
- Literature
- Math
- Music
- Science
- ALL OF THE ABOVE

- 2. What recreational experiences are offered?** The academic part of summer programming is just part of the experience. There are many hours that students will spend outside of the classroom. Some programs have very structured schedules to include specific activities throughout the evening. Others may have a more flexible schedule that allows students to choose what they do. Make sure that activities that are offered are a match for your child's interests.
- 3. What supervision is provided, and by whom?** You are concerned about the safety and well-being of your children and may have reservations about sending them to summer programs. Some key considerations are who will be supervising the students, how often they are supervised, and safety protocols that are in place.

- 4. What financial assistance is available?** Summer programming can be expensive. Many programs offer needs-based financial assistance for students to attend. You may also find that organizations in your community are interested in supporting your child with attending camp. Payment plans also may be an option.
- 5. How are special accommodations (e.g., twice-exceptionality, dietary restrictions, religious beliefs) made at the program?** Your child may be twice-exceptional (i.e., a gifted child who also has a disability). These children need special accommodations to be successful and get the most out of summer programs. Make sure the program is familiar with the needs of twice-exceptional students and is willing to make accommodations that are a match for your child. Similarly, be sure to ask how health, dietary, or religious factors that require accommodation will be handled.
- 6. Will my child be okay staying away from home?** Staying away from home in an unfamiliar setting can be challenging, especially for younger students. If your child is reluctant to be away from home for the length of the camp, perhaps there is a nonresidential option. Many nonresidential campers choose the residential option the next year after seeing the experiences available to residential campers. For other students, residential options may be a good fit but may take an adjustment. Supporting your child during a first camp is important, but this does not mean promising to pick up your child if they are unhappy in the first few days in an unfamiliar place. In almost all cases, young people settle in and love the experience. In fact, it is not unusual for a child who has teary eyes when parents leave them to be crying that they are not ready to go home and leave their new friends when parents arrive to take them home.





fit for your child, you want to make sure that these issues are considered as part of the program plan. Contrary to the misperception that gifted children prefer to socialize primarily with adults or have poor social skills, the concept of idea-mates describes how these children might select peers from a group of age-mates. Summer camps provide the opportunities for gifted children to find friends by offering a wide range of course options and learning opportunities so that high-ability students can form friendships with those who share their ideas and interests.

When high-ability students cannot find their idea-mates, they may sometimes face challenges connecting with classroom peers and feeling different from their classmates. One specific concern parents may have is what happens when their child experiences being around peers of similar ability levels for the first time, sometimes referred to as the “Big-Fish-Little-Pond” effect.<sup>2</sup> In other words, these parents may be concerned about how their children will feel about themselves when being around students of equal or higher ability for the first time. Although there are some studies that have found a decrease in self-concept in these situations,<sup>3</sup> other studies have found that students who participate in advanced learning opportunities in summer programs did not show such declines. Students also tend to report higher amounts of school satisfaction and nonacademic self-concepts when they are around “true peers” who have similar academic ability to them.<sup>4</sup> In an analysis of 33 studies, researchers found that high school students experienced the largest negative changes in self-concept with smaller negative effects for younger students.<sup>5</sup>

Also, contextual and individual factors may influence a particular student’s experience with advanced academic summer camps. For example, students who attend gifted programming or special schools may be more accustomed to being around similar peers than students who are used to performing at higher levels than their classmates.

Social development may also be impacted by whether a student chooses a residential or commuter option. One study<sup>6</sup> analyzed survey responses from student participants at university-housed gifted summer programs and found that students reported increased comfort in their program peer relationships. The study suggested that summer program experiences may nurture student independence and self-confidence. The camps can also build students’ confidence about navigating a new environment like a college campus and forming relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds.

Overall, summer programs for gifted and talented learners provide opportunities for advanced students to explore their passions, meet idea-mates from diverse backgrounds, and foster their independence and self-confidence.

There are lots of questions and points to consider when choosing a summer program. Where do you locate information about summer camps that provide academic challenge? A starting point may be to discuss with your child’s gifted resource teacher or gifted coordinator. These educators are likely familiar with various programs available and can talk with you about what works best for your child. You should also check with colleges and

## life-changing summers



universities in your state to see what is being offered. Websites for your state gifted association likely will provide information about summer programming. Likewise, the Gifted and Talented Resources Directory on the National Association for Gifted Children's website has contact information highlighting summer programs. Another great source is to talk with young people who have attended a summer program and to their parents.

### Conclusion

Camps vary considerably in their approach to study and to activities they offer. As a parent, you want the best for your child, so it is well worth asking questions if you are not familiar with the possible summer camp opportunities. Of course, you want your child to learn in class as well as in the living portion of the camp experience. Summer camps can offer such key experiences that campers count the days until they return for a second, third, or even fourth summer.

Hoping you find the perfect summer program for your child! 💡

### Resources

The Center for Gifted Studies at WKU. <https://wku.edu/gifted>

Davidson Institute Blog on Gifted Summer Programs:

Residential. [www.davidsongifted.org/gifted-blog/gifted-summer-programs-residential](http://www.davidsongifted.org/gifted-blog/gifted-summer-programs-residential)

NAGC Gifted and Talented Resources Directory.

<https://giftedandtalentedresourcesdirectory.com>

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### Endnotes

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