MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM A 3 FULL-DAY TO 5 FULL-DAY PROGRAM

Is my child ready?

One of the biggest concerns we hear from parents is when they are considering the transitional move-up adjustment from the Little Buds program (ages 2-5 with partial or full week options) to the Big Oak program (ages 6-14) that only offers 5 full-day and full-week camp programs. Many worry if their child is ready, and if so, how to best support children in this transition? For some parents, the 5 full-day, full-week transition feels "too soon" or "too much" whereas for others, they feel comfortable with their child's readiness and ability to endure a full-time schedule of camp fun.

It is inevitable that at some given point during early childhood education each child will need to make the transition from part-time to full-time school or camp. It is natural to have some concerns about making this change and how to best support your child (and parent) through it. We hope this helps parents in understanding the transition more deeply.

Just as we offer more flexible programming for our youngest campers (ages 2-3) through offering half-day, full-day, or partial week options, we feel beginning at age 4 and through age 6 is where we see the majority of our campers show the developmental growth necessary to once again make a transition, but now into full-day and full-week programming. Typically, this process begins around age 4 when they move out of the needed naptime phase and can more easily endure longer periods of activity and focus. To support this development, we introduce more structured and facilitated activities that prepare our 4 & 5 year olds for what they will find in a full-time class setting. This helps to establish a familiarity with classroom processes and procedures as well as age-appropriate actions and response they will find in full-time Kindergarten, first grade or other full day type programs including our very own Big Oak Day Camp. Some children may adjust more slowly than others, but typically by age 5, children have the focus ability and social capacity to remain engaged for longer-lasting activities and higher level social and emotional learning.

One of the differences we often see while at camp is how children act and interact with peers versus individual play and attention span that may be displayed at home. Some parents are amazed that their child is so socially engaged and focused while at camp because at home the parent simply hears the child claiming they are bored every 5 minutes! This can be more of a product of having younger, older, or no siblings to play with rather than a sign that the child is not ready to remain focused on a full-day or full-time schedule. While at camp or school they observe how their peers act, and this becomes a model for them to follow.

Among several key factors we look for in measuring the child's level of preparedness for full-time programming is the child's ability to follow directions and make smooth transitions from activity to activity. For those children who have been in pre-school, we typically see an elevated ability to adjust more smoothly and with fewer needed transition 'reminders' or 'pre-warnings' that a transition is coming. By the last year in Little Buds,

campers seem well versed in understanding transitions, daily routine, and following directions.

The final important component is social preparedness (social maturity). I think we have seen some social stagnation in many children for whom COVID protocols and shutdowns have had negative social as well as academic impacts. Researchers are now writing about the social delays being observed but also feel can be quickly reversed with full socialization and a restored sense of social normalcy. We are proud of the fact that in the summers of both 2020 and 2021, we were able to maintain a strong sense of social normalcy while also protecting the health of campers and staff. As one of only 30% of camps that operated nationwide in 2020, we did not have a single case of the virus among campers or staff! As a result, we think our campers were ahead of the curve socially compared to peers who did not have the same social summer experience.

We seek to build community across all our camps, but this is a particularly important focus for the Big Oak program. Among the key recipe ingredients for establishing community is the social consistency that comes from being present at camp. Activity leaders plan and facilitate activities that utilize and build on activities and social connections made at camp. Whether it's the well-loved Sockey tournament, World Cup, Ga-Ga, Curiosity Shops or even daily recess, campers are building on the relationships with peers through the participation in these activities. Peer friendships are the result of connections formed through consistent attendance. It is this same consistency that has proven necessary for a camper to feel socially integrated into the group. Missing a day of camp is like missing a day of school instruction. Campers return but with a feeling of being lost and a bit disconnected from the group as they endure stories shared about the day before. Because relationships form best through consistency and regularity of attendance, Big Oak requires a 2-week minimum sign up and only promotes five full-day options. We build community.

Camp is the social side of school but magnified by 20 times! Through play, our campers learn to navigate the social and emotional learning while being constantly supported by adult staff. Whether it be from the activity leader (usually a career-teacher) who is facilitating each activity or the ever-present lead counselor, campers are lovingly and carefully guided, adding to the rich experience of a five full-day program. The days are not only filled with fun and laughter but also packed full of countless (not to mention valuable) social and emotional lessons they apply to life. This is what makes camp such a great incubator of skills that support five full-day program benefits. It is also why camp is filled with memorable & meaningful moments to be enjoyed by campers & staff.

Want to talk? Call me cell: 267-261-4098. I love talking about camp!

Steve Haines

Executive Director