



SUMMER CAMP / CONSIDERATIONS AND ADVICE

Get ready for camp by thinking about camp

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'If your kid literally gets carsick every day, think twice before putting them on a bus the entire summer.'

By **ADAM REINHERZ**

January 29, 2024, 3:35 pm



Summer is a party. (Photo courtesy of Falcon Camp)

Outdoor swimming pools remain empty, but summer camp directors are teeming with advice. When asked for guidance about selecting a great option, local camp

professionals had more pointers than marshmallows at an overnight.

When picking a summer camp, knowing who works there is essential, according to Nechama Gorkin, director of [Camp Gan Israel Squirrel Hill](#).

“A camp program is really only as good as its staff,” she said.

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One way
of

evaluating employees is by talking to directors and requesting information about their hires. Another means, Gorkin continued, is asking fellow parents or campers familiar with a camp and its counselors.

“Kids really know if someone’s paying attention to them,” Gorkin said.

Talking to other parents and campers is “really the best advice,” agreed Rachael Speck, division director of children and family day camping and teen engagement at the [Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh](#).

“Find out how their experience has been, because a parent’s perspective and a child’s perspective will be obviously different — not better, not worse, but different from the perspective that a camp director or a camp staff member can give you,” she said.

Gleaning insight from parents and campers is critical, Speck added, but it's also important to connect with camp administrators.

If there are questions about allergies, security or individual needs, for example, reach out to a director or other administrators. Camps often put a lot of information on their websites, but having a direct conversation ensures everyone is equipped for a successful summer, she said.



Creating crafts and memories. (Photo courtesy of Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh)

In recent years, Speck and fellow camp leaders have worked to create a [more inclusive camping experience](#).

“Whether you have a child who is neurotypical or neurodiverse, it’s important to [know your child’s needs](#) and whether the camp is equipped to meet those needs,” she said. “Not every camp is right for every child.”

Be sensible when selecting a camp, Dave Devey, director and owner of [Falcon Camp](#) in Carrollton, Ohio, said.

“It’s important to take a realistic view of your child and know what their interests are and what’s age-appropriate,” he said.

Sometimes parents fail to recognize that younger children may need shorter terms or a day camp instead of prolonged weeks away from home. Other times, mistakes occur because summer goals aren't aligned, he explained.

“If you want your kid to be a soccer star and they aren't particularly interested in soccer, then a specialized soccer camp is not a good fit. But if they want to be a soccer star and you send them to overnight camp with horseback riding, that's not going to be a good fit either,” he said.

In nearly 40 years of leading Falcon Camp, Devey said he's offered plenty of advice about choosing a summer option.

“One of the important things for first-time families is you're going to be nervous,” he said. “You're supposed to be nervous. It's your job as parents, but you have to work through that. Speak to someone in administration at the camp. Look at their website. Ask questions. You have to be comfortable with the answers you're getting. If you speak to a camp and you don't get a good feeling, then go somewhere else; parent instinct is a good measure.”



EJC campers enjoying a sunny day on Cheat Lake (Photo courtesy of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh)

Devey runs an overnight camp, but he said his advice applies to people considering day camps as well: “Look at the website, program, rules. Look at how they deal

with discipline, communication, how they deal with staff ratio per camper. Ask about staff training and how they choose their staff.”

Parents, guardians or whoever is picking a summer option need to understand their role in the process, he said.

“If a camp has a rule that there are no cellphones allowed and you’re planning on hollowing out a book and sticking a phone in there so your kid can call you, don’t do it,” Devey advised. “You’re teaching them how to break rules.”

Part of what makes camp such a valuable experience is the countless hours of preparation.

Both Devey and Speck encouraged decision-makers to check a camp’s accreditation with the [American Camp Association](#).

“That is the gold standard for camps,” Devey said. Inclusion requires directors answering questions “that you probably haven’t thought of asking,” like the necessary number of showers or sinks.

Being part of the ACA means that “we have to adhere to over 300 operational and health and safety standards,” Speck said. “They help inform our staff training and really our entire camp operation.”

Whether it’s the ACA, American Red Cross or Department of Health, several entities ensure a camp follows best practices, she added.

Another thing for parents to consider when choosing a camp is cost, Speck said.

She suggests parents find out whether there are additional fees for food, transportation, swimming or towels.

“It’s important for parents to know what’s included and not included because this varies a lot from program to program, especially in the Pittsburgh area,” she said.

Rabbi Sam Weinberg, Hillel Academy of Pittsburgh’s principal and educational director agreed.

The Squirrel Hill-based Jewish day school [operates a summer camp](#).

“Among the myriad of factors parents should also examine when choosing a camp are dates,” he said. “Check your family’s schedule. Too often parents sign children up for camp and don’t realize that the dates don’t actually meet their family’s needs.”

Also, for those seeking a particular level of religious observance, ask the director or camp leadership about food, Shabbat, dress code, [playlists](#) or other matters that ensure there’s a good match between camp and family, Weinberg said.

And consider the seriousness of transportation, he added. “If your kid literally gets carsick every day, think twice before putting them on a bus the entire summer.”

Camp is a wonderful chance for so many people to connect in meaningful ways, Weinberg said. Don’t squander the opportunities by failing to do the necessary homework. **PJC**

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Jewish values become part of camp experience

ALEXANDRA GOLDEN

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Posted Jan 23, 2024 at 6: 00 PM





Photo by Ben White on Unsplash

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Summer may seem far away, but registration for Jewish summer camps is opening. While some might opt for a sleepaway or overnight camp, day camps offer different opportunities for kindergarten to middle school-aged campers.

Goldstein

+2

Shelby Goldstein, Park Day Camp director at Park Synagogue in Pepper Pike, and Rachael Speck, division director of children and family, day camping and teen engagement for the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, spoke about the benefits of Jewish day camps and what they offer.

“Having a camp be a Jewish camp is something that really enhances the experience,” Speck told the Cleveland Jewish News. “You can go almost anywhere for fun in the sun or sports and arts and crafts and

Speck

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swimming, but I think being at a Jewish camp really adds meaning to that experience. A lot of our experience is framed through Jewish values and those Jewish values are integrated into almost every element of the camp experience.”

At Jewish day camps, there is the celebration of what makes Judaism “special” and includes different activities such as singing Hebrew songs in the morning and throughout the week, Goldstein said.

“I think that it really allows kids to connect with their Judaism and just celebrate being a Jew,” she said.

Although it is a Jewish day camp, the camps at the JCC of Greater Pittsburgh are open to everyone, whether they identify as Jewish or not, Speck said.

“It is less about religion being tied in and more about the values being integrated into each of the activity areas,” Speck said. “... We have those set Jewish values that we focus on throughout the summer and each week at Shabbat, we recognize those campers who really lived out that value of the week.”

At Park Synagogue's day camp, it is a way for Jewish children to be with other Jewish children, Goldstein said.

"I think it's great for kids to get to know kids all different faiths and just the whole diverse group, but I think that really getting to know your Jewish counterparts is something that is really beneficial for kids," Goldstein said.

Along with just meeting other Jewish children, it is an opportunity to meet new children from different parts of the community or different schools as well since campers are usually there for multiple weeks, Speck said.






Day camps are usually Monday through Friday with the times ranging based on the session and camp. Park Synagogue's day camp is normally 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with extended care as early as 7:30 a.m. and as late at 6 p.m. for working families, Goldstein said. The camp is eight weeks long, but also offered are sessions that are two, four and six weeks, she said.

For the JCC of Greater Pittsburgh, the programs are all full day and there are specialized camps that are one week but most campers are in the camps for multiple weeks. They base their camp schedule about the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Speck said.

"We know a lot of our families rely on us for child care, so we try to make sure that we align our camp dates with when children aren't in school and families need child care," Speck said.

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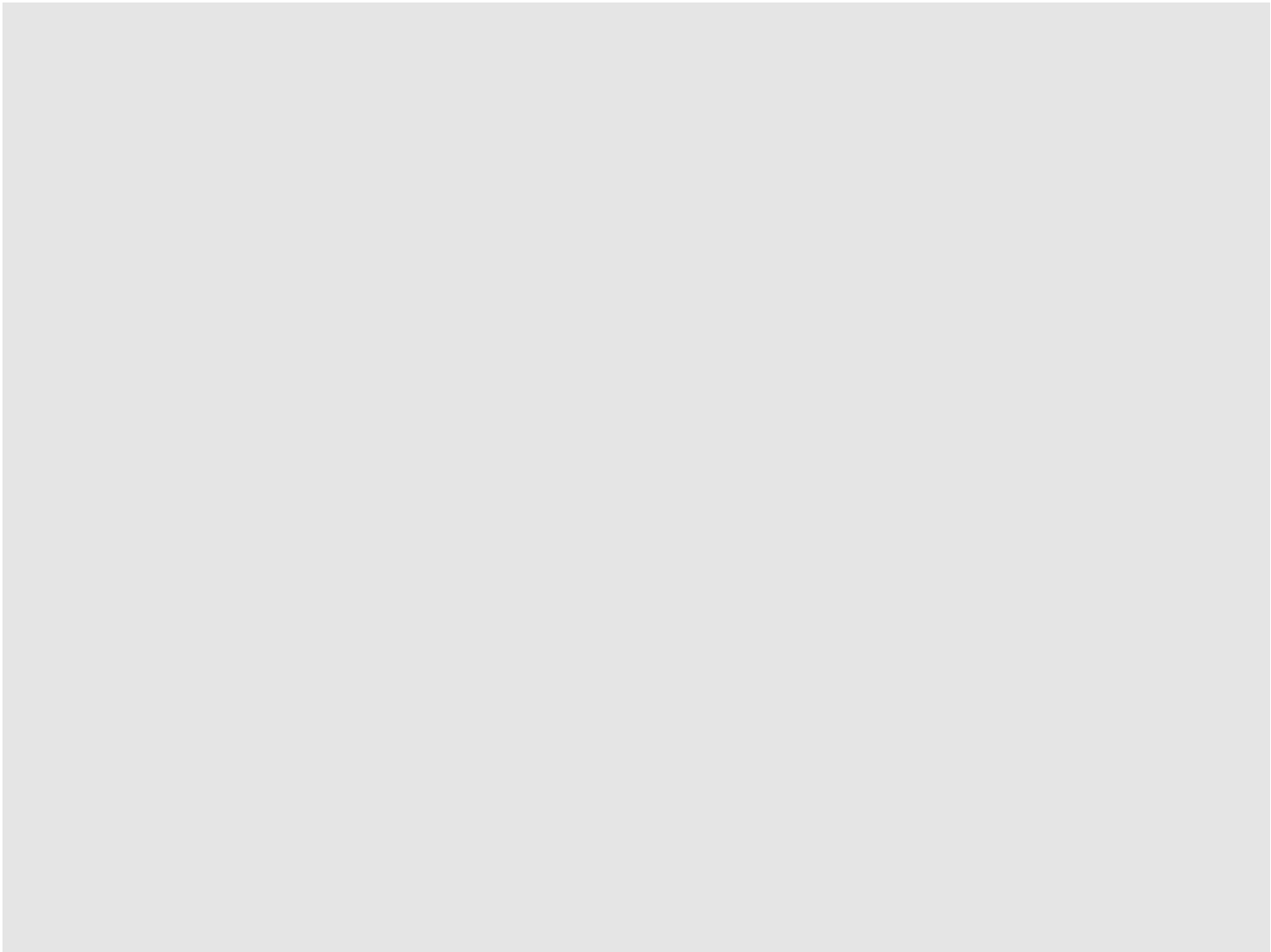
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Sen. Bob Casey visits JCC, weighs in on childcare, aging, antisemitism and Israel

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Toddlers, choralists and conversation enable Pennsylvania's senior senator to experience community and leave inspired

By **ADAM REINHERZ**

January 8, 2024, 12:13 pm



Sen. Bob Casey holds a stuffed animal and introduces himself to early childhood students during a name game song on Jan. 5 at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill. (Photo by Adam Reinherz)

U.S. senators don't often need to introduce themselves, but when Bob Casey walked into a Squirrel Hill classroom on Jan. 5, most people didn't recognize him. So, while clutching a stuffed animal and being watched by nearly a dozen seated toddlers, Pennsylvania's senior senator waited for his turn in the "Hickety Pickety Bumblebee" song before lyrically introducing himself as "Bob."

Casey's classroom visit was part of a morning-long tour of the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill.

As he moved through the JCC's Early Childhood Development Center, Casey walked past handmade challahs topped with sprinkles, colored signs reading "Welcome Sen. Casey, Shabbat Shalom," and many community members who told him about [staffing crises](#), rising costs and the need for political intervention.

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Across
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Sen. Bob Casey and State Rep. Dan Frankel enjoy a laugh during a meeting with early childhood students at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill on Jan. 5. (Photo by Adam Reinherz)

commonwealth, poor pay and lack of benefits have led to 3,980 unfilled child care and pre-K positions and the closure of almost 1,600 classrooms; if staffing needs were met, an additional 30,047 children could be served, according to a [2023 survey of 1,107 early care programs](#) by Start Strong PA and Pre-K for PA.

Liza Baron, director of early childhood development at the JCC, and her staff highlighted the opportunities available to enrolled students but noted teacher shortages result in waiting lists with scores of young children unable to access quality education.

Casey thanked the educators for their efforts before exiting the early childhood center and quietly entering the JCC's Levinson Hall, where a group of older adults sang Gene Autry's "Home on the Range." As the choralists concluded, the senator clapped and moved to an adjacent room where more than 50 Allegheny County residents enjoyed a subsidized kosher meal of pasta, ground meat, green beans, [challah, oranges, pineapple and oatmeal cookies](#).

Jason Kunzman, president and CEO of the JCC, told attendees that Casey needs no introduction but mentioned his position as chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging.

Casey thanked Kunzman for the opportunity to visit and interjected some levity.

“Here’s the joke that I use: Once you’re born, you’re aging. That’s the best I could do at comedy today,” Casey said before pointing to a [Senate-issued book describing common fraudulent activities](#).

If someone is trying to “scam you,” call 855-303-9470, Casey said. “There’s also no law against hanging up on someone.”

Casey then worked his way around the room, briefly chatted with a group studying the weekly Torah portion, shook hands with attendees and paused for several photos.

Sarah Honig, a JCC volunteer who frequently partakes in senior programming at the center, told the Chronicle she enjoyed meeting the senator and hopes he recognizes her demographic’s needs.

“It’s important we have more support for the JCC, for [AgeWell](#), for transportation,” she said.

“There are a lot of people who can’t come here because they can’t drive. We hope he is going to help us.”

Approximately 19.7% of Allegheny County residents are 65 and older; only Palm Beach, Florida, has more seniors, according to a [2022 University of Pittsburgh report](#).



Sarah Honig and Sen. Bob Casey. (Photo by Adam Reinherz)

Jordan Golin, president and CEO of JFCS, told Casey that thousands of area adults are served by AgeWell, a 20-year-old collaboration between the JCC,

JFCS and the Jewish Association on Aging.

“It’s inspiring,” Casey said.

Seeing so many services afforded to people of all ages, races, religions and backgrounds, is “an affirmation of the human family and the importance of making sure that we have [opportunities for people to interact and to engage](#),” the senator told the Chronicle in an interview following his JCC tour.

Elected officials have a responsibility to support centers and communities, he added.

“Sometimes it’s funding. Sometimes it’s policy,” Casey said. “I’m of the opinion that the federal government has to do a lot more than it does on a range of issues: child care, pre-K, home and community-based services.”

Another critical matter requiring attention is antisemitism, he said: “You have to use your voice and your platform to call it out — and not just call it out and highlight it but condemn it, categorically condemn it, literally be intolerant of that intolerance, extremism and hate that is the basis of antisemitism.”

Neither major political party can escape that responsibility, with Democrats and Republicans both guilty of “either turning a blind eye to antisemitism or sometimes fomenting it,” he said.

Identifying and condemning antisemitism is a start, but politicians can do more, Casey said: “When you have a [problem on a college campus](#) that has to be investigated, there has to be a consequence if it rises to the level of what the Department of Education calls a ‘hostile environment.’”

One month after the onset of the Israel-Hamas war, the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights [reminded schools of their legal obligations](#) under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to provide “all students” an environment free from discrimination based on race, color or national origin.

“The rise of reports of hate incidents on our college campuses in the wake of the Israel-Hamas conflict is deeply traumatic for students and should be alarming to all Americans,” Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said. “Antisemitism, Islamophobia and all other forms of hatred go against everything we stand for as a nation.”

Since Oct. 7, there’s been a dramatic shift in campus attitudes and activities, according to the ADL Center for Antisemitism Research. Before Oct. 7, 66.6% of Jewish students described feeling “very” or “extremely” physically safe on campus; after the start of the war, [the number plunged to 45.5%](#).

The good news is that the Office of Civil Rights is investigating claims, Casey said, but “they’re not going to be able to complete them in a timely fashion if they don’t have the personnel and the resources to support that personnel.”

The senator pointed to his [efforts at increasing appropriations for the Office of Civil Rights](#).

On Dec. 8, Casey wrote to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Chair Tammy Baldwin and Ranking Member Shelley Moore Capito that an “increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents following Hamas’ horrific terrorist attack on Oct. 7, 2023, has underscored the urgent need to address the overall national rise in discriminatory sentiment and action over the past several years.”

As chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families, Casey noted his concern that “this harassment and discrimination is affecting our nation’s students in schools and on college campuses.”

Funding is a piece of the puzzle, but the solution must be “broader” than merely augmenting government spending, Casey said. “It’s a challenge in society.”



Sen. Bob Casey, fifth from left, is joined by community members and Jewish professionals during a visit to the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill on Jan. 5. (Photo by Adam Reinherz)

Casey described the state of domestic antisemitism during a [speech on the Senate floor in December 2022](#).

“I thought and believed at that time it was bad, but if anything, it’s more widespread and more pernicious today than it was then,” he told the Chronicle.

The senator's assessment aligns with a [recent report from the ADL](#), which found that more antisemitic incidents occurred between Oct. 7-Dec. 7 than during any two-month period since the organization started keeping tabs in 1979.

Casey called antisemitism a “scourge” on society.

Current affairs should foster political cohesion and an eradication of hatred, but Washington has become a place where people too often “categorically” denounce others while failing to resolve the issues at hand, he explained.

Still, the absence of debate and a demand for immediate positioning isn't necessarily beneficial.

Casey pointed to calls from politicians and pundits that the senator declare a stance on whether Israel should engage in a cease-fire with Hamas.

“I get pressed all the time. People come to my house,” he said.

Whether Israel continues its actions or announces a cease-fire is “in essence a military question,” Casey said before referencing remarks by U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

“This could be over tomorrow if Hamas got out of the way of civilians instead of hiding behind them, if it put down its weapons, if it surrendered,” [Blinken told ABC News' Martha Raddatz last month](#). “What there ought to be as well, is a call on behalf of the entire world for Hamas to do just that — that would stop this tomorrow — but in the absence of that, Israel has to take steps not only to defend itself against the ongoing attacks from Hamas but against Hamas' stated intent to repeat Oct. 7 again and again, if given the opportunity.”

“I think Secretary Blinken said it pretty well,” Casey said. “They want to repeat October the seventh over and over and over again, because of their hate — not for a state — because of their hate of the people.”

Watching a compilation of footage from Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks reinforced Casey's views, he said: “For me, it told me that this is a group of terrorists that will not be satisfied with simply having a violent act, intermittently or whenever they can

engage in that violent act. They want to destroy people. That is a different and much more dangerous kind of terrorism than I've ever seen. And I don't think we talk about that enough: that this October the seventh isn't over — that wasn't a day in time — October the seventh is a continuing rallying cry for these terrorists.”

Casey said that although numerous issues deepen societal schisms, there's hope for the future.

“Places like this can be a platform, or a venue, where people come together of all different faiths and they figure out a way to help people get through their day,” he said. “Look, we need inspiration, and this place is one.” **PJC**

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