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The high cost of summer camp

15 share

Summer camp is awesome, no doubt. It's where kids learn to ride horses, bake banana bread, swing a tennis racket, and sing silly songs. At camp, you get your hands dirty, wear holes in your jeans, and run around until you're ragged. But with many full-day camps costing at least \$400 a week, who can afford it?



Shutterstock / Morgan Lane Photography

Camp is the place to learn about bugs and all sorts of creepy crawlers.

In January the emails about kids' summer camps start flying around on the online parent groups.

First comes a message about a cycling camp that takes kids on bike rides in San Francisco and Marin. And then one from Ella's mom who's sending her daughter to a tennis camp for four weeks, and another from Susan who's looking for someone to go to a rock-climbing camp with Aidan the week of July 18.

And then parents begin sending around complicated Excel spreadsheets outlining their children's summer schedules.

The possibilities are exciting but then you look at the prices. That full-day tennis camp costs \$550 a week. The horse camp: \$650. That cool science camp where your kid would build his own bug farm: \$375. Thankfully the Park and Rec camp is only \$100 to \$200 a week.

The website [Sign Up For Camp](#), which helps parents schedule their kids' summers, estimates that 10 weeks of full-day camp in the San Francisco Bay Area will set you back about \$4,000 per child, with each week costing \$400 on average. Ouch!

Yes, many camps are advertised as being only \$200 to \$300 per week but that's for a half-day program. Once you tack on after-care, you easily get up to \$400 for some of the fancier camps.

Thankfully many camps offer scholarship programs and sliding scales to help those families who can't afford to pay the full price. San Francisco mom Rachel Lederman has taken advantage of these programs. "We have benefited from a number of free or low-cost summer programs such as the Gulf



The Mommy Files

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The Mommy Files: A local mom's take on raising kids by the Bay.
 By Amy Graff, Read Bio

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of the Farallones Marine Sanctuary camp, which is offered free certain weeks through neighborhood rec centers, and sports camps providing scholarships...through the Boys and Girls Club and Aim High," Lederman says. "However, I think the number of truly low cost or free alternatives has shrunk with the general budget crisis."

For some families with one parent staying home, camp is a luxury and the kids only spend a few weeks here and there at camp and the rest of the summer hanging around home with mom or dad. But for many families, camp is a necessity. Both mom and dad work full-time and so camp is daycare.

My husband and I both work full-time and last spring I started piecing together a summer schedule for our two kids. My initial plan had a price tag of \$4,000 for eight weeks and this gave my husband and me sticker shock. Even with my mom picking up the kids early so we didn't have to pay for after-care, we couldn't swing it. And so we narrowed down our camp schedule to two weeks of an inexpensive art camp, one week of a bike camp, and then my son would go to one week of the super-cool science-oriented Camp Edmo while my daughter attended a dance camp. For the remaining weeks, we asked my parents to help, arranged some babysitting swaps with friends, and decided to take a few days off work. We brought our total cost down to \$2,300.

I'm not the only one finding ways to reduce summer costs. For this story, I spoke with Elizabeth, a grandmother living in San Francisco's Glen Park neighborhood, who's helping out her daughter with childcare in an effort to keep summer costs down. (Note: Elizabeth asked SFGate to not use her last name.)

"When my daughter started talking to me about camp, I couldn't get over how expensive it was," Elizabeth says. "We were floored by the prices. It was an average of \$800 a week for two kids. My daughter and her husband have good jobs but they also have a house payment and they send their kids to private school. They couldn't afford it."

Elizabeth's grandchildren are attending two weeks of the affordable Silver Tree program put on by SF Parks and Rec, and then they're spending several weeks with Grandma. The parents are also each taking a week off to stay at home with the kids.

Of course, it's not fair to come down hard on the camps for being overpriced. These camps offer fabulous programs and have high overhead costs: insurance, rent, staff.

Ed Caballero, co-founder of Camp Edmo with locations around the Bay Area, says his biggest expense is staff. Edmo has a high ratio of staff to kids with one camp instructor for every eight kids (many less expensive camps have fewer staff members, which means less supervision). "We hire college graduates, educated folks on a professional track in art, science, and technology," Caballero says. All of these instructors undergo 30 to 40 hours of instruction.

Caballero believes that it's worth spending some money to send kids to camp. He says that a number of studies have shown that kids who do enrichment activities over summer are more likely to graduate from college.

And most importantly when you're learning at camp it's usually fun. "Camp offers a whole new world of learning," Caballero says. "Kids are learning for the sheer joy of doing it. They're exploring out of sheer curiosity. They're not doing it for a grade."

There's a lot of truth to this. My son spent a week at Edmo earlier this summer and he hasn't stopped talking about it (and singing the songs) since. He loved the science experiments at Edmo and he's now doing them at home in the kitchen.

While many parents can't afford to send their kids to camp for 10 weeks over the summer, it's definitely worth paying for a few weeks.

Are you sending your kids to camp? What have you done to reduce costs?

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Posted By: [Amy Graff](#) (Email, Twitter, Facebook) | July 13 2011 at 10:33 AM

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suburbmom 9:32 AM on July 15, 2011

see recent NYTimes article on the subject (though the article focused more on sleepaway camps) -- if you need summer day camp for childcare due to 2 fulltime working parents, there actually are lots of relatively inexpensive options - particularly all the local parks and rec for less than 200/wk 40+hrs/wk. HOWEVER, what drives up the price is parents wanting ENRICHMENT camps that are either semi-educational or improve sports skills. You get what you pay for though - my kids did some park and rec camp which was really fun and cheap

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[Media](#) (62)
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[Public transportation](#) (1)
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[Recalls](#) (1)
[Route 66](#) (30)
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[School lunches](#) (8)
[School/preschool/kindergarten/elementary school/SFUSD](#) (49)
[Self-esteem](#) (1)
[Sesame Street](#) (1)
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--but it's all 14 yr- olds supervising them. Camps that aim to teach 'science' or more - saw one that had a 'writers' workshop' that was \$500/week (not including extended care) at a private school; too pricey for me but I did sign up for a couple weeks at Camp Galileo which is not totally play oriented and has college-age instructors and ran 350-400/wk -that was a splurge). -There are always those that bemoan the lack of unstructured time for kids nowadays; it's true, but I remember being really bored some summers and watching TONS of bad TV (game shows and soaps back then) in addition to playing around the neighborhood.

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livingbackeast 8:03 AM on July 15, 2011

If you've got girls, check out Girl Scout resident camp. You don't have to participate in a troop during the school year to go to camp. Google "Girl Scouts of Northern California" in December for Summer 2012. You also don't have to go to camp only in your local council.

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clifechris 1:42 PM on July 14, 2011

I direct a non-profit sleep-away summer camp in Cambria, CA. I wish we lived at a time where kids could just explore the creek or play kick-the-can with friends. The best choice is for parents to spend time with their kids daily. Yes, the camp alternative can be expensive - there are real costs. Church camps can be a cheaper option, along with city and agency camps. But your kids grow up fast. Investing in them is the best use of your money.

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mcfadden94114 8:37 AM on July 14, 2011

There are TONS of summer camps that are less than \$400. If you can't pay the \$400 for Kids Outdoor Club, send your kids to Silver Tree through Park and Rec for \$250. Park and Rec has a tennis camp as well for around \$250. All the Park and Rec centers offer great camps as well for under \$250 including the high demand Randall. For most kids it's about being with friends, not having a PhD run the camp. Let kids be kids.

REPLY (2) POPULARITY: 2 [Report Abuse]



lisute 1:43 PM on July 13, 2011

Steve & Kate's camp runs under \$2100 for the summer I believe. And that is a GREAT experience for kids. There would have been a couple weeks it didn't cover but pffft.. so you send them to Parks N Rec for those weeks (or you take it off). I'm not seeing where this \$4k price tag comes in.

REPLY (2) POPULARITY: 2 [Report Abuse]

▶ 2 replies



ender_of_sf 1:37 PM on July 13, 2011

Sounds like people are just looking for cheap child care for the summer.

REPLY (1) POPULARITY: -1 [Report Abuse]

▶ 1 reply



pumpgold 1:27 PM on July 13, 2011

I have tried, unsuccessfully to find a summer camp for my 14 year old daughter. She's too big for some of these day camps and she's too young to work! We've tried summer school; however, public school doesn't offer summer school for kids who don't need the credits and private schools charge a fortune! And the worse part of all is that I do NOT qualify for low-income anything!! She went to the YMCA for 5 years and it was worth the cost; however, now that she's older, we are stuck year after year searching for a program that is suitable for her age. Also, the Counselor in Training programs offered at the Y and other facilities can only accept a small number of individuals to volunteer; therefore, she's left out again. If someone has any suggestions on where to send a 14 year old girl in either Alameda or San Francisco, I am all ears!

REPLY (0) POPULARITY: 0 [Report Abuse]

▶ 2 replies



ihaveathought 12:48 PM on July 13, 2011

We are doing both in our home, taking some time off the be home with our son and sending him to camp. He is having a fun time, lots of outdoor sports at one camp and he is doing Camp Edmo too. At the end of each day he is really tired and he is learing in many ways too; science, teamwork, his swimming is really improving and he is becoming a little less shy. Expensive, yes, but worth it in our opinion.

REPLY (1) POPULARITY: 1 [Report Abuse]



easterbunny 12:48 PM on July 13, 2011

I think everyone has to be creative these days with their summer scheduling. I take 3 weeks off, my husband takes 3 weeks off (1 week just he and the kids, 2 weeks for family vacation), the kids spend time with grandparents/auntie/friends, then they get 2 weeks of various day camps (only \$250/wk/kid) and one week at YMCA overnight Camp (\$500 per kid). That adds up to \$2K for the summer, which is a lot, but is similar to what I paid for 10 wks of daycare for just one of our children when they were infants, and they're getting a great mix of activities.

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- Train Trip/California (18)
- Travel (32)
- Trend alert (4)
- Twins (6)
- Vaccinations (5)
- Violence/toy guns (4)
- Weddings (2)
- Welcome (2)
- Whining (2)
- Working mom (12)

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I can't say enough good things about YMCA camp. My kids went there shy and nervous and came back a week later empowered, confident & 3 pounds slimmer! They couldn't wait to go back this week. They wanted to go 2 weeks, but we can't afford it. Next year, I plan to work harder at squirrelling more money away here/there over the course of the year so that they can go 2 weeks next summer - it's just such a great experience for them.

I have a co-worker who has a great plan: He and a neighbor pay a college student \$10/hour to watch their kids for most of the summer. She takes them to the park, the pool, the mall, etc. Some weeks they go to 1/2 day day camp and she's there to pick them up and feed them lunch and play in the afternoon. Each parent pays \$125/week for 2 kids - that's great!

 REPLY  (2)  (0) POPULARITY: 2  |  |  [Report Abuse]



elcerrito1999 12:45 PM on July 13, 2011

City of El Cerrito and Albany Y day camps are around \$200/week for full day.

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