



## Summer Day Camp Camper and Family Support Guide

Dear Camp Families,

Welcome to another exciting summer camp season at Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey day camps! We are thrilled to have your camper join us for an enriching experience.

Something we often hear from guardians is how they wish we could supply a daily schedule because when they ask campers what they did, they struggle to get a response. Sometimes they struggle with how to address new behaviors. We also recognize that campers may come to camp with different mental, emotional, and social health issues – and transitioning to camp can be difficult. Enter our Camper Support Guide – something relatively new based on your helpful feedback.

This guide is designed to help you support your camper's journey at camp and stay connected with their daily activities, while also helping you to deal with things that may come up during their time. *It is meant to supplement to the standard Family Guide*, which contains general information, policies, and procedures. Here are just few things you can find in the next few pages:

- Want to prepare for camp and learn how to talk to your camper about camp? Head to pages 2.
- Addressing a behavioral issue at camp? Head to page 4.
- Does your camper have mental, emotional, or social health needs and you want to help set them up for success? Head to page 5.

We hope we can make this summer as smooth as possible for you and your camper.

Yours in camping,

**The GSHNJ Camps Team**  
**summercamp@gshnj.org**

## Help! We have never been to camp before...

Sending your child to day camp for the first time can be both exciting and nerve-wracking for families. It is natural to feel a mix of emotions as you prepare for this new adventure. As you embark on this journey together, remember that day camp offers a wonderful opportunity for your child to explore, learn, and grow in a safe and supportive environment. Trust in the dedication of the camp staff who are committed to ensuring your child's well-being and happiness. Take the time to familiarize yourself with the camp's routines, activities, and policies, and do not hesitate to reach out to camp staff with any questions or concerns you may have – our Family Guide and this guide can help answer many of the questions you may have. Emphasize to your child the excitement of making new friends, trying new activities, and creating lasting memories. Encourage open communication and reassure them that you are there to support and cheer them on every step of the way. As you prepare for the first day of camp, embrace this opportunity for your child to embark on a summer filled with fun, discovery, and new experiences. We will be with you every step of the way.

## Preparing for Camp

The Family Guide that you have received outlines specific information around our Standards and Goals, Sessions and Programs, Camp Procedures and more. The information here is focused a little differently, so make sure to use the two documents together.

Before your camper leaves for camp, make sure to:

1. Review the Family Guide and go over any rules or procedures with your camper.
2. Review the packing list provided in the Family Guide and your pre-session e-mail (the week before your session) to ensure your camper has all the necessary items. Not sure about something? Feel free to contact us directly.
3. Note any specific concerns or medical conditions with the camp staff to ensure proper care. The best way to do this is through the paperwork you completed at the time of registration and follow up with an e-mail if there is anything on which you want to expand. We will discuss other needs beyond medical needs further along in this guide.
4. Label all personal belongings with your camper's name to avoid mix-ups.

Remember, our camps are tech-free. Embrace unplugging! At camp, we encourage campers to disconnect from electronic devices and immerse themselves in the natural world and interpersonal connections. We are tech free while they are on site, but respect that they may need a device for their time before or after the camp day or during their commute. We respectively ask that you discuss the following with your camper before camp:

- Please do not photograph or record other campers without their consent – on camp, on the bus, etc.
- Please do not post pictures or videos of other campers. This includes splicing images or videos with other posts, remixing, etc.

We understand that consent may be hard to explain to your camper or for them to understand, but we often have campers who do not have photo permissions at camp for various, sometimes serious, reasons. Failure to comply with this could lead to your camper being removed from camp, especially if the nature of image/video sharing is malicious.

### Communication

Our dedicated and experienced camp staff are here to ensure your camper's safety and well-being. Feel free to reach out with any questions or concerns by contacting the camp office. Your Family Guide provides contact numbers and e-mail addresses you can utilize during camp. You will speak to the Camp Director, Assistant Director, or Health Center staff – all administrative staff members who can assist during your time with us. Please understand all staff rotate around camp and there may be a delay in returning a call – but we will get back to you as soon as possible.

To keep you updated on your camper's camp experience, consider asking them the following open-ended questions each day – designed to go beyond “How was your day?” or “What did you do today?” We know these are often met with a shrug or an “I don’t know...stuff.”

- Did you learn something new today?
- What was the most exciting part of your day at camp?
- Did you try something new or challenging today?
- How are your new friends at camp? Any interesting stories?
- How are you feeling today? Do you have any worries or concerns to share?
- What did you learn today that was new or exciting?
- Did anything funny or interesting happen today?

Camp is a wonderful opportunity for campers to develop increased independence and self-confidence, to try new things and challenge themselves in a safe environment. You can encourage your camper to solve minor issues on their own, like making new friends or resolving conflicts with fellow campers. The questions above may help you identify areas where you can encourage your camper – but remember, you can always count on our staff support. Let your camper know that you are there for them, even when you are apart. Sometimes it helps to explain to campers that counselors and camp staff are like their teachers at school or babysitters – designated safe caregivers.

### Safety and Wellness

Your camper's safety and well-being are our top priorities. If you have any medical or dietary concerns, please inform the camp staff before the start of the camp – as we mentioned above, you should write anything of importance on your camp registration forms, as we rely heavily on these for communicating needs with camp staff. If something comes up after camp has

started, please ensure to provide new instructions or information in writing so it can be shared with staff.

Trust that your camper is well cared for and that their camp experience will contribute to their personal growth, learning, and a lifetime of cherished memories. Our own anxieties can weigh heavily on children – if you are nervous, they will be, too.

After camp, ask your camper about their favorite memories, what they learned, and how they have grown during their time at camp. This reflection can help them appreciate the value of their summer camp experience – and is helpful for us when you complete your end of camp surveys. Campers complete weekly surveys for us, too, but their words do not always translate on paper. Your feedback comes into play right away, as we begin planning for one summer at the end of the previous! This reflection can also help you think of new out-of-school time opportunities for your camper – wrap around wellness.

### Behavioral Issues

Addressing your child's behavioral issues at summer day camp requires a thoughtful and collaborative approach involving both the family and the camp staff. The camp environment can be quite different from school or other social settings and sometimes campers have disputes or display behaviors that are unfamiliar to families. Please note, we are not simply discussing negative behaviors here, but also any behavioral needs that may require additional support, care, or attention. That said, here are five steps for families to address potential issues that may require intervention:

1. **Open Communication with Camp Staff:** Reach out to the camp director or administrative staff members to discuss your child's behavioral concerns before the camp starts. Be honest and clear about your child's challenges and any strategies that have been effective in the past. We will do what we can to utilize coping strategies or behavioral plans. Feel free to ask about our policies and procedures for managing behavioral issues and inquire how you can work together to support your child.
2. **Set Clear Expectations and Consequences:** Establish clear expectations with your child regarding their behavior at camp. Discuss the camp's rules and guidelines (outlined fully in our Family Guide) and the importance of following them. Define both positive and negative consequences for behavior. Emphasize the benefits of positive behavior and the consequences of disruptive actions.
3. **Collaborate on a Behavior Plan:** If necessary, work with the camp staff to create a behavior plan tailored to your child's needs. This plan should outline specific strategies and interventions to address and manage their behavioral issues. Ensure that the camp staff is aware of any triggers or sensitivities that may impact your child's behavior and how to de-escalate situations if necessary. Understand that we must always act in the

best interests of the entire group and cannot guarantee 1:1 coverage or being able to adhere to all plans – together, we will work to establish a mutually beneficial plan.

4. **Stay Consistent and Supportive:** Maintain open lines of communication with camp staff throughout the camp session. Regularly check in on your child's progress and behavior. Reinforce the camp's expectations and the behavior plan at home to ensure consistency between home and camp environments. Encourage your child to reflect on their actions and how they can make better choices.
5. **Problem-Solve Together:** If behavioral issues persist, collaborate with the camp staff to problem-solve and adjust the behavior plan as needed. Discuss strategies to address specific challenges. Keep a positive and solution-oriented attitude, focusing on helping your child develop better coping skills and social interactions. Remember that addressing behavioral issues at summer day camp is a collaborative effort between the family and the camp staff – and may look different from efforts in school. Open communication, consistency, and a supportive approach are essential in helping your child succeed at camp while addressing any behavioral challenges that may arise. It is also important to note that, on rare occasions, campers may be dismissed from camp without return of fees.

### **Mental, Emotional, and Social Health (MESH) Needs**

Supporting campers with MESH needs is a priority for our staff. The more open you are with needs, the more prepared we can be to craft a supportive, positive, and inclusive experience. Their needs may include homesickness, anxiety, support around social interactions, and emotional regulation. It may go beyond that – for example, supporting campers with autism spectrum disorders, neurodiversity, anxiety, or depression. And it very well may go beyond that. Camp staff are trained to recognize signs of distress and are equipped with tools and resources to provide appropriate support. They work to foster a culture of open communication, creating safe spaces where campers feel comfortable expressing their feelings and concerns. That said, every camper is different and the more we know, the more we can do.

Activities are designed to promote teamwork, empathy, and self-confidence, nurturing positive social interactions and emotional well-being. Staff members will work to facilitate meaningful connections between campers, encouraging a sense of belonging and camaraderie. We hope we can address mental, emotional, and social needs of campers, ensuring a fulfilling and enriching camp experience for all. Here are five key ways families can provide that support:

1. **Open Communication:** Maintain open and ongoing communication with camp staff. Share your child's specific needs, preferences, and any strategies that have worked well in the past. Provide a point of contact for camp staff to reach out if needed – ensure contact information is up to date.

2. **Preparation and Social Stories:** Create a social story or visual schedule to help your child understand what to expect at camp. This can reduce anxiety and create a sense of predictability. Discuss camp routines, activities, and the camp environment with your child before the camp starts. While schedules vary, we can provide a basic outline for transition times.
3. **Meet with Camp Staff:** Arrange a meeting with the camp director before your camper's experience. This allows you to discuss your child's needs, strengths, and challenges. Collaborate with the camp staff to establish a plan for supporting your child's success at camp.
4. **Provide Comfort Items:** Allow your child to bring comfort items or sensory tools if they find them helpful. These can be discreet and provide comfort during times of stress or sensory overload. Ensure that camp staff are aware of these items and how they support your child.
5. **Reinforce Self-Advocacy:** Teach your child self-advocacy skills. Encourage them to express their needs, preferences, and boundaries to camp staff and peers. Practice strategies for handling social interactions, such as joining group activities and making friends.

### **Putting It All Together – Our Top Ten AKA Tips to Aid in Transitioning Your Camper to Camp**

1. **Pre-Camp Preparation**
  - a. Visit camp. Take a tour or come to an open house before your camper is set to start.
  - b. Discuss expectations. Talk about activities, making friends, the daily schedule, and their program. If they seem nervous or anxious, validate their very normal feelings.
  - c. Pack their gear. Help your camper pack their backpack, making sure they know what they have and where it is.
2. **Emotional Support**
  - a. Validate feelings. Let your camper express their emotions and let them know their feelings are normal and that is okay to be scared about new things.
  - b. Talk about separation. Remind them that camp is designed to be fun and safe and go over the daily schedule, including when you will drop them off and pick them up.
  - c. Give encouragement. Encourage a positive mindset, emphasizing making new friends and learning new things. Celebrate adventure!
3. **Day of Camp Routines**
  - a. Establish a morning routine that helps campers feel prepared. This may include favorite breakfasts, a routine with the family, or some other helpful transition.

- b. Say goodbye confidently! Short, positive goodbyes are the best – prolonged goodbyes, including offering to take them home early, can make separation difficult. We’re not suggesting you be cold, but be mindful.
  - c. Be consistent in drop off and pick up. Try to keep timing and routines consistent.
- 4. During the Camp Day
  - a. Encourage interaction. If your child is shy, encourage them to talk to others.
  - b. Instill self-advocacy. Teach your camper to speak if up if they need help or have issues with activities, other campers, or counselors. Knowing they can rely on adults at camp, much like school, is empowering.
- 5. Communication with the Camp
  - a. Stay in touch with the camp staff, especially if you have concerns or questions. Read e-mails and documents. If your camper has specific needs or concerns, don’t hesitate to contact staff ahead of time.
  - b. Check in if there are needs to be managed. If your child has behavioral needs, medical conditions, or dietary restrictions, communicate in advance so the camp can plan accordingly.
- 6. Post-camp Reflection
  - a. Check in with your camper each day. We have provided suggestions above on how to talk to your camper about their day to maximize the conversation.
  - b. Celebrate success! Whether they learned a new skill, made a new friend, or tried something new, celebrate the positives to reinforce their confidence.
  - c. Review materials, notes, and projects to allow reflection and for them to share their experience with the family.
- 7. Managing Homesickness
  - a. Prepare for the possibility of homesickness. Younger, more sensitive, and first time campers can experience homesickness. It is quite normal and passes once everyone – campers and families alike – settles into the rhythm of camp.
  - b. Pack a comforting item, if you think it might help, such as a stuffed animal or photo.
  - c. Stay positive about the coming days (and weeks, if appropriate). Remind them about the fun activities, friends they are making, and how much they will learn and do. Offer reassurance that they will be okay and that it gets easier each day.
- 8. Encourage Independence
  - a. Allow your camper to take responsibility. Depending on their age, they can take responsibility for or assist with small tasks, like packing their own lunch or getting dressed for the camp day – both of which can boost confidence and give them a sense of ownership.
  - b. Encourage your camper to work through minor conflicts or challenges on their own, but reassure them there are adults (camp counselors) available to help – that is why they are there!
- 9. Addressing Concerns
  - a. If your child is reluctant or struggling to transition, it can help to break the experience into smaller steps or pieces, like getting through the first day.

- b. If your child expresses specific fears, talk them through and find solutions – speak to camp staff if needed for these solutions.
10. Long Term Support
- a. Keep the momentum going! As the days or weeks progress, continue to show interest in the experiences your camper is having.
  - b. Prepare for the wind down. As camp comes to an end, help your child process feelings they have about leaving. Some campers may have been reluctant at first, but are now very used to the routines and activities and may feel sad about leaving their friends. Some may have an immense sense of pride in their accomplishments from the summer. No matter how they feel, the last day can be a difficult one. Remind them of ways to keep the good feelings related to camp with them

*It is important to collaborate with camp staff to create an environment where all campers feel safe, supported, and valued. We hope the information provided here can support your needs in our commitment to creating a positive and nurturing environment for all campers. If you have any questions or need assistance at any time, please do not hesitate to reach out. We look forward to an amazing summer with your camper!*