

# The Secrets to a Transformational Summer Camp Experience for Your Teen



# What is Your Teen Doing This Summer?

**YOUR CHILD'S GROWTH AND CURIOSITY DON'T TAKE A BREAK JUST BECAUSE SCHOOL'S OUT. FOR MOST OF THEIR CHILDHOOD, YOU'VE MADE SURE YOUR CHILD HAS HAD OPPORTUNITIES EACH SUMMER TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE, EXPLORE THE AREA, EXPERIENCE SOMETHING DIFFERENT, PRACTICE THEIR SKILLS, OR LEARN NEW ONES.**

They've trekked through the wilderness and rigged sails at outdoor camp. They've drilled their jump shots and mastered the backstroke at sports camp. They've launched rockets and collected insects at local STEM camps.

But after summers of the same old thing, it all begins to feel a bit routine. The common options can be valuable, but familiarity often gives way to feeling as if you've fallen into a summer rut.

As your child approaches their teenage years, they may feel bored or uninspired by the usual summer options. As a parent, you may be concerned that they won't be challenged enough if they return to the same-old wilderness camp or local sports clinic. That they may miss opportunities to truly grow.





# What is Your Teen Missing?

**TEENAGERS CAN BE TOUGH TO DECODE, AND BALANCING WHAT THEY WANT WITH WHAT THEY NEED IS ONE OF THE GREAT CHALLENGES OF PARENTING. YOU SENSE YOUR TEEN COULD BE MISSING SUMMER OPPORTUNITIES — BUT WHAT OPPORTUNITIES, EXACTLY?**

## **A wide range of new experiences and the freedom to choose among them**

As middle school gives way to high school, the academic thrill your child once got from encountering new subjects can fade as stressful exams and boring classroom lectures become commonplace. You want to reignite that spark of curiosity — possibly for something that leads to a college major, a career, or a lifelong endeavor. If it doesn't happen during the school year, it can certainly happen over the summer.

But it's difficult for children to discover new interests and explore new ideas when they stay in the same place, surrounded by the same people and perspectives they've always known. Too often, children find themselves stuck in the neighborhood “bubble,” surrounded by people of the same background, ethnicity, religion, and way of thinking. That's not what the real world is like.



You want your child to become comfortable among diverse groups of people and cultures. To develop the courage to explore beyond the boundaries of home so that they are prepared for a global future and to navigate different nationalities, languages, and customs with ease.

## **An individualized approach**

Every child has a different learning style. Every child has different interests and different perspectives. Every child has their strengths and their weaknesses.

So why would you choose a summer program that lumps your child in with the herd? Your child will benefit most from a summer program that treats them as the unique individual they are, not just another number.

## **A remedy for ‘brain drain’**

“Brain drain” is real. Children can lose up to two or three months of math and literacy skills over the summer, **some experts say**. Teachers report spending the first few weeks of each new school year reviewing material from the last one.

Even more troubling, the evidence shows brain drain can be **cumulative**. The idle months of summer can pile up to affect a child's readiness for high school, college, and the workforce.

The cure? Many experts recommend summer programs that focus on learning and creativity. Teens deserve a break from the drudgery of the classroom, but their brains crave challenging and fun activities that keep them engaged.

### Something that's missing at school

Driven to meet state standards and prepare their students for standardized tests, many schools focus most of their curricular time on math and literacy. These subjects are certainly essential, but when they command so much of a school's attention, they tend to crowd out other equally valuable disciplines, such as the arts or innovative critical making courses.

A high-quality summer program can both augment what your teen is learning in school, and provide new opportunities for exploration that can help prepare them to make meaningful choices when they reach college.

### The opportunity to stretch and test themselves

Speaking of college, it won't be long before your teen is applying and enrolling. And when they do, they'll start in on a lifetime of weighing their options and making tough decisions for themselves.

Summer is a great time for teens to practice independence before autonomy is thrust upon them in college.

In the long run, doing things the easy way every summer — that is, returning to the same familiar program year after year — may not help children grow or develop new skills. Now is the time for teens to discover their passions on their own and build good habits.

### Your child doesn't have to miss out this summer.

Your teen can escape a summer rut. You can bring curiosity, joy, self-discovery, and a passion for learning back into your child's life this summer. This summer can be a transformational summer.

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Thank you so much for providing a safe and comfortable environment in which to explore and try new things.

— Julie G., Parent



# What is a Transformational Summer?

**A transformational summer is a summer free from limitations.**

Every other summer option may have its strong points, but each is limited in some way. One camp may expose your teen to social diversity, but it may be lacking in academic opportunities. Another camp may offer rigorous academics, but the lessons may be rigid and the atmosphere hypercompetitive.

A teen ought to be able to meet who they want and try what they want and discover who they truly are in the face of new opportunities. A transformational summer experience will provide just that.

**A transformational summer is about growth and self-confidence.**

When your child comes home raring to go, excited and propelled forward by their new experiences into the coming academic year, you know they have had a transformational summer.





# What Makes a Summer Camp Transformational?

**SOME SUMMER CAMPS KILL TIME. A GREAT SUMMER CAMP TRANSFORMS LIVES.**

How do you find a transformational summer camp for your teen? Here are some of the characteristics to look for:

## Culture

**TEENS ARE NOTORIOUSLY HARD TO BREAK OUT OF THEIR SHELLS. BUT WHEN THEY DO, EVEN THEY ARE AMAZED BY THE STRENGTH, DRIVE, AND CHARACTER THAT LIES BENEATH.**

A transformational summer camp promotes reflection and risk-taking. Supported by staff and program administrators, students feel comfortable stepping outside their comfort zones, trying new experiences, and opening up their authentic selves to the world.



## From the Sidelines to the Center Stage

[Christopher Streat](#), for example, was, by his own admission, a “nervous, quiet, very shy, always-on-the-sideline student” in his high school classes. Over two summers at EXPLO, however, Christopher was encouraged to challenge himself and explore his passions. Among other things, he tried social psychology and robotics, but it was in his theater and improvisation classes that he truly came alive.

Now, Christopher has landed a prestigious internship on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*.

After his transformational summer experience, Christopher says, “I was no longer self-conscious about what this true version of myself looked like to other people.”

## Community

**TEENS WANT TO FIND THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD OF PEOPLE AND IDEAS, BUT THAT CAN BE DIFFICULT WHEN THEY'RE SURROUNDED MOSTLY BY PEOPLE WITH SIMILAR BACKGROUNDS AND WAYS OF LIFE.**

A transformational summer camp nurtures a student body that is diverse in every way. Students will find themselves meeting, working with, and most importantly, befriending students from different parts of the country and the world. They will be exposed to, and learn from, the perspectives of others, and at the same time, they will discover the commonalities that connect us as human beings.

### Global Connections, Lasting Friendships

Take **Beyoncé** and **Yvonne**, for example. When they met last summer at EXPLO, Beyoncé was a 15-year-old from Mississippi and Yvonne was a 17-year-old from China. Beyoncé wants to be the next, well, Beyoncé, while Yvonne excels at basketball.

Despite — or because of — their differences, the two became fast and inseparable friends. Now, Beyoncé is eagerly learning Mandarin.

"It's like I found my other half," she says. "I just didn't know that she was all the way around the world."



## Programming

**A TRANSFORMATIONAL SUMMER CAMP OFFERS A BROAD RANGE OF ACTIVITY CHOICES AND THOUGHTFUL SOCIAL PROGRAMMING.**

Transformational summers don't just happen in a classroom. The activities students take part in before, after, and between classes matter just as much. The trips they take off campus, the meals they share together, the talent shows, the discussions, and the games they play are all opportunities for discovery, growth, and courage.

### Taking a Stand Together

By 13, almost every student has experienced bullying in some way, as a victim, perpetrator, or bystander. In **an annual tradition at EXPLO**, more than 200 students come together to share how they've been affected by bullying in a judgment-free space. It's an eye-opening evening for most of the participants.

Before the night is over, every student is invited to the podium to speak up for what they believe in — and to speak out against behavior (their own and that of others) that they will no longer tolerate. After the ice has been broken and students start to feel comfortable sharing, many of them seize the opportunity.

“We’re asking kids to claim their identity, asking them not to be passive,” says Elliot Targum, Head of EXPLO at Wellesley. “To be courageous. To be a participant in life.”

## Student Agency

**SUMMER HAS ALWAYS BEEN A TIME OF INDEPENDENCE, EXPLORATION, AND SELF-DISCOVERY. NONE OF THESE THINGS ARE POSSIBLE WHEN SOMEONE ELSE IS SETTING THE AGENDA.**

What were the most memorable, transformational summers of your youth? Chances are, when you think back on summers past, you rarely think about following a path laid out for you by someone else.

A transformational summer camp helps students develop independence by giving them real choice. Only then can they understand what it means to take responsibility for their actions and learn to create a life of meaning and purpose. At EXPLO, students choose their classes and activities, and what events and trips to attend. They’re encouraged to work together and to think independently — not just go through the motions of what they think is expected of them.

## Asking for More Learning

The middle school students in [EXPLO’s Philosophy + Ethics workshop](#) exercised their independence when, after two weeks of spirited discussion was set to wind down, they asked for a third.

Guided by instructor Llona Kavege, the students had covered everything from environmental ethics to metaphysics to epistemology. And when the two-week workshop came to a close, they weren’t ready to end their exploration.

The students respectfully petitioned EXPLO’s curriculum office to add a third week. The petition garnered 14 signatures and EXPLO, along with the instructor Kavege, agreed. Twenty students enrolled in the third-week Advanced Philosophy + Ethics workshop.

“This is exactly what we mean when we talk about student agency,” Targum says. “It’s not just that they’re demanding — respectfully or otherwise — additional philosophy classes. It’s that in just two weeks at EXPLO they have developed the confidence and resourcefulness to make their voices heard.”

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If it hadn’t been for EXPLO I might have lost my voice in the crowd... I’m happy that such a program existed for students who were like me.

– Jordan M., Student





# How to Find a Transformational Summer Camp: Where to Start



IF YOU DO A GOOGLE SEARCH FOR “EDUCATIONAL SUMMER CAMP,” THOUSANDS OF RESULTS WILL COME UP. HOW DO YOU NARROW THEM DOWN? HERE ARE THREE SEARCH TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

**1. Talk to the people running the program.**

As a parent, you know the best way to get information about your child’s education is to go straight to the source. Most summer camp staff members will be happy to speak to you about their programs. Ask questions that are relevant to your child’s interests and, of course, ask about the characteristics of a transformational summer camp described in this guide. Keep in mind when you call: the person answering the phone may not actually work on campus. Ask to speak with someone who works directly with students over the summer.

**2. Ask for reference families.** Reference families similar to your own can give you a good idea about what to expect from a summer camp.

**3. Speak to your child’s teachers.** Not all teachers are authorities on summer camps, and some are just familiar with the camps in their region of the country. But good teachers know your child’s learning style and learning needs best and can be a useful starting point when searching for a summer camp.

# Other Aspects to Consider: The Practicalities

## Length of the Program

Transformation takes time. Popular psychology holds that it takes 21 days to establish a new habit. At EXPLO, we've discovered there's some truth to that.

As students enter their third week here, we see them turning a corner. Their confidence emerges, their friendships solidify, and agency takes a firmer hold.

## Local vs. Sleepaway

Overnight camps promote independence and a strong sense of community. But if you and your teen choose an option closer to home, the summer can still be transformational.

Whichever you choose, local or sleepaway, the camp should make an effort to incorporate day students and overnight students equally into its community.

## Faculty-to-Student Ratio

As you compare summer camps, be sure to compare faculty-to-student ratios, not staff-to-student ratios. Some camps will inflate their numbers by counting non-educational staff, such as custodians or bus drivers.



## How Is the Day Filled?

Many summer camps end their programming after dinner, allowing children free time to just explore the city around them. This can be fun for teens, but it's not necessarily safe or time well-spent.

A transformational summer camp will fill the entire day — morning to night — with high-quality, enjoyable programming while giving students the freedom to choose their path through the day.

## Logistics

Getting to and from a camp can be stressful for a teen who is on their own. If your teen is flying in from far away, make sure the camp provides transportation to and from the airport and that someone remains at the airport until the plane is in the air. Flights can be canceled last minute and someone should be on hand to help your child plan their next move and, if need be, return to campus.

## How Is the Food?

The quality of the food may seem like an afterthought, but it's important to a child's summer camp experience. Meals are essential bonding experiences, and good food puts nervous teens at ease.

Be sure to ask if the camp will accommodate your teen's special dietary needs (like kosher or vegetarian or vegan) and if three meals a day are included in the tuition. Some programs may only cover two meals a day.

## Medical Care

Some camps outsource medical care — after hours, especially — to a clinic that's 10 or 15 minutes off campus. This can be an eternity when a child is in pain. It's also just far enough away that children may be reluctant to go because they don't want to cause a scene.

The presence of a 24/7 medical staff on campus can be reassuring to teens — and their parents. Also be sure the nurse's office stores and distributes medications, keeping your teen on track and their medications out of the hands of anyone else.

## Nonprofit vs. For-Profit

Who is running your teen's summer camp and what's in it for them? As private equity firms and big businesses snatch up summer camps and run them for a profit, it's important to know where your tuition investment is going. Nonprofit educational organizations spend substantially more on professional development than for-profit organizations and companies.

## Financial Aid

A transformational summer camp experience may be more attainable than you think. If you're not sure about the cost of summer camp, many premier camps offer financial aid. Be sure to ask how much financial aid is available and how you can qualify.

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The sheer diversity, in people, classes, and activities, is one of the many things that make the atmosphere of EXPLO so unique. I've never been to another place quite like it.

– Peyton H., Student





# EXPLO: 75,000 Transformational Summer Experiences — and Counting

Since we started in 1976, EXPLO has been committed to providing transformational summer camp experiences for students in elementary through high school. Our programs — including our flagship experiences on the Yale, Wellesley, and Wheaton campuses — draw students from all over the country and the world because we:

1. Believe in **giving students choice**
2. Foster a safe atmosphere for **risk-taking, daring, and courage**
3. Strive to make intellectual, academic pursuits **engaging** and **exciting**
4. **Encourage curiosity**
5. Create a **diverse, thoughtful, and kind student body**
6. Employ **passionate** and **thoughtful faculty members**

Our experiential teaching approach allows students to learn by doing. They work independently and make their own decisions. The focus is on exploration — not on tests, grades, or competition.



## How to Learn More About EXPLO

**IF YOU OR YOUR TEEN IS INTERESTED IN A TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCE AT EXPLO THIS SUMMER, HERE'S HOW TO LEARN MORE:**

- Visit our website, [explo.org](http://explo.org)
- Call us at 781.762.7400 or [schedule a call online](#)
- Attend an [informational meeting](#)
- Connect with a reference family — give us a call and we will be happy to put you in touch

[www.explo.org](http://www.explo.org)