

Family Camps

Reaching People for Jesus!

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Family camps, now commonly conducted by many Family Ministries directors around the world as part of their annual ministry program, are often underestimated as opportunities for outreach to family and friends. Family camps can be a time of decision-making by non-Adventist spouses, children, teens and adults to follow Jesus and be baptized. Over many years of working with family camps, we have seen not-yet-Christian family members come to know the Lord through the experiences they have at camp. Baptisms of children, teens and adults are wonderful moments and provide the added blessing of witnessing to not-yet-Christian family members who are enjoying the camp.

There are a variety of ways to run family camps, of course, depending on resources available, the venue, the facilities, the length of the camp, and the number of families attending. Every camp, however, can be structured to maximize the potential for families to make friends. This friendship factor is most important in strengthening fellow believers and winning new people for Jesus. It is crucial to make family camp a “grace-place,” where people feel welcome and loved, even though they may be at different stages in their faith development and may exhibit different standards of conduct in their lives.

In order to enhance a camp’s outreach and witnessing potential, there are several things we have found important to consider during the planning phase. We offer them here as suggestions from which camp directors can pick and choose ideas that are appealing and practical in their unique context.

Family Camp Planning Group

Consider a Family Camp Planning Group. This group can help you as the Family Ministries Director to plan camp programs and may even be able to provide support for you or your camp leader during the camp. This group can consist of:

- The FM department director.
- Individuals who have previously attended a family camp.
- Individuals new to the family camp concept who will likely bring fresh ideas and perspectives.
- Individuals from families with not-yet-Christian family members, who will often have a special sensitivity to the needs of this important group.

Prayer for Family Camp

The most significant ingredient of a spiritually successful camp is prayer. Pray as you plan the camp, as you recruit helpers, and as you receive each application. Pray that the Holy Spirit will fill the camp and move on the hearts of all those who will come. Pray for the safety of the campers and pray that everyone who attends will be drawn closer to Jesus.

Advertising

Advertising for the camp gets the word out in the form of posters, adverts in church papers, letters to previous camp attendees, and via the Family Ministries website or the website of the mission, conference or union. People will be encouraged to attend and to invite their family and friends to join them for a family camp holiday when advertising of camp events is accurate and appealing and when families perceive the program as “family friendly.”

Include a list of guidelines/rules with the application form so that expectations of campers are made clear—no smoking, drugs or alcohol are allowed on site, etc. Have families sign on their application forms indicating their intent and the intent of those they bring to camp to comply with family camp rules. In this way there will be no confusion or misunderstandings about standards once campers arrive.

Processing Applications and Anticipating Needs

From the time of the first enquiry via phone, e-mail, letter or other communication, people should be made to feel welcome to attend the camp.

- Respond quickly to any questions or requests for forms and information.
- Be friendly, warm, hospitable and willing to be flexible if families have special needs or requests.
- Send receipts for camp payments and confirmation of accommodation as quickly as possible. Many families and parents need to book time off work months in advance, so it is important that their bookings and receipts are handled promptly.
- If family campers are planning to bring not-yet-Christian friends and family members, welcome them. Share standards of behaviour at the camp in a way that solicits cooperation. If someone is worried that their family member/friend will want to smoke, you can offer alternatives, such as the possibility for them to smoke off site and away from the view of other campers. These issues can be tricky to manage, so it is important to set clear guidelines and anticipate challenges ahead of time.

Circulating Pre-camp Information

It may be helpful to send out a pre-camp information pack. This builds confidence in the camp and helps to set a welcoming and considerate context. The pack may contain some of the following items:

- Welcoming letters and information from the camp directors, worship leaders and activity leaders.
- Map and travel directions.

- A list of what to bring.
- A list of campers. To help people connect with each other, provide photos with a short description of interests; include gender and age of children.
- Camp program/daily schedule.
- Details of any activities for which families may need to do some pre-camp preparation, such as special clothing/shoes that may be needed, sports equipment, talent night, children's program plans, gifts and cards for "Secret Families" (see below), etc.
- Travel game ideas (optional).

Family Name Labels

Provide name labels that clearly identify each family's accommodation. Prepared name labels give families a sense of welcome and belonging. They also help people to find each other easily as well as to take the first step in connecting to others—learning each other's names.

- Colourful name labels for each family unit, room, trailer, tent, or cabin can be made quite easily on a computer, printed out and laminated.
- Labels can be recycled, i.e., saved and used in future years if and when the same families return to the next family camp. Alternatively, you may give them to families as souvenirs.

Welcome Packs

Each family unit can be given a welcome pack of useful information and supplies as soon as they arrive at the camp. If the camp has permanent living units, the packs can be left in the campers' tent, caravan/camper trailer, cabin, or room. Families will sense that you have anticipated their needs and prepared for them and will feel more welcome and special. The welcome pack could include the following:

- An attractive "welcome to camp" card (a customized computer-printed card made using a simple greeting card graphics program).
- A list of families' mobile/cell phone numbers so that they can contact each other, especially in emergencies (get approval to circulate numbers beforehand).
- Information about meal arrangements, meal times, what to bring to meals, washing-up arrangements, etc.
- Leaflets about local tourist attractions, local map, etc.
- Pencils and Bible puzzle sheets for the children to use in their free time.
- Samples of Christian family-type magazines, or other Christian family information, such as a list of useful websites.
- A carton of fruit juice, some cereal bars or packets of biscuits/cookies in case families arrive after meals.

Mealtimes

Making friends is a vital part of a successful camp, especially to reaching out to the not-yet-Christians. Mealtimes are natural opportunities for building friendships; the more friendship connections families make, the greater interest people will have in on-going fellowship throughout the year with one another, including church attendance. Friendships increase the likelihood that families will attend future family camps.

- Arrange tables to encourage families to eat and chat with other families.
- Special activity placemats can help families interact happily with other families at their dinner table while waiting for meals. You can create such placemats incorporating simple crossword puzzles, secret code messages, dot-to-dot drawings, etc. copied from children's magazines. Books such as *I Spy Sticker Book* (Scholastic, 2000) and *I Spy Super Challenger* (Cartwheel Books, 2007) by Jean Marzolo or the *Look Alikes* series by Joan Steiner (Little, Brown Young Readers, 2003) provide double-page spreads that could be color-copied or dismantled and plastic laminated on thick card stock suitable for use as a placemat. Place a different picture on each table at a mealtime to encourage families to work together to find the different items or complete the placemat activities.
- Make colorful laminated cards with different conversation starters or funny things to do to encourage families to interact with each other.
- Place a container of crayons and some children's Bible worksheets or colouring pages on each table for the children to use.

Grace Box (Thanks before Meals)

A grace-box is an attractively decorated box (a shoe-box makes an excellent size) with a long slit in the top. Create a grace-box with a removable lid and place slips of paper and pencils within it. Children write their own hand-written mealtime grace-prayers, sign their name and deposit their grace-prayer in the box. At each family camp meal a different grace is selected from the box. The one who draws the prayer hands it to the writer who then reads the grace before the meal, keeps the grace they wrote (so it's not accidentally used twice), and chooses a small treat, such as a sweet, a dried fruit bar, a tiny toy, balloon, sticker, etc. The grace box will encourage children to come to meals early and to be involved in writing grace-prayers. It may also be less threatening for not-yet-Christians when children say the prayers before meals.

Local Treasure Hunt

Plan a treasure hunt walk. (A *treasure hunt* requires participants to follow directions, heed certain clues and be observant in order to discover "hidden treasures" or find landmarks the trail-designer has pre-selected.) Before campers arrive, have one of the Family Camp planning team members walk around the area or perhaps visit the closest town to map out a "treasure hunt." Compile a list of things that participants must observe during the walk. Clues can be intriguing, puzzling, or require careful observation, or teach something of the history and culture of the area. It could be beneficial for this walk to familiarize campers with local essentials such as telephones, grocery stores, pharmacies/chemists, banks, post offices, medical centres, cafes, playgrounds, etc. This will help to orientate the families to the local area so they can find their way around later.

- Print out the list of clues, making sure there are lots of things for the children to watch for—wild flowers, birds' nests, unusual rock formations or trees, etc. on their treasure hunt walk. You might want to hide in advance of the walk some literal "treasures" (sweets, trinkets, etc.) along the way for participants to find if they follow clues successfully.
- Give careful directions using markers the campers can follow (road signs, buildings, certain trees, certain number of steps to take, etc.).
- Give each family a photocopy of the question/direction sheet (clipped to a clipboard to make writing easier) and a pencil.

- You might like to have a place where families can pick up a cool drink along the way, by stationing a car with an ice-box full of juice cartons halfway along the route.
- Ending up at a play area can be a good idea, so children can run off extra steam and play together until everyone has completed the trail.

Secret Families

“Secret Families” is a popular activity at some family camps. It is like “secret friends,” only includes whole families in the activity. Each family is secretly given the name of another family attending the camp. The object is to give little gifts and cards to their secret family, either to individual family members (such as a small toy for a child) or to the whole family (such as a box of biscuits/cookies).

- If possible, assign families the name of their secret family before they arrive at camp, so that they can find and wrap their little gifts at home rather than having to do that at the camp. Make sure that families understand that they must not let their secret-family find out who they are.
- Print the details of their secret family on a card. Include the ages and gender of the children, and any special needs the family might have. Include clear instructions about how the Secret Families activity will run and the times when the Secret Families box will be opened and the gifts will be distributed.
- Keep a master list of the secret families for reference.
- Purchase a large plastic treasure chest, or similar lidded box in which families can place their gifts for distribution.
- If you have a very large camp, you may need to be creative about the gift distribution in order to cope with the larger quantities of gifts. Gifts can be given out at the end of a group meeting, or during meals.
- Encourage secret families to do helpful things for each other during the camp (secretively, of course), and to pray for each other.
- During the last evening of the camp, create a fun activity where each family tries to guess who their secret family has been. Choose a family at random and see if they can guess who had their name. When they have correctly guessed the family who had their name and who gave gifts to them, then the family they identified will next try to guess who secretly had their name, and so on.

Worship Activities

Some family camp participants prefer to have all activities multi-generational; some prefer a mix of multi-generational programming and age-group programming. If facilities and staff are available to have separate worship settings for different age groups, worship can be better tailored to the specific needs of young children, juniors, teens and adults with age specific songs, presentations and activities.

- Separating adults and youth permits different worship/study options for the adults, such as Christian family-building seminars, a creative and interactive group especially for newcomers to Christianity, and deeper Bible study/discussion groups or sermons.

- Adult craft, sport and special interest groups may also be offered as alternative activities at larger camps and this can help not-yet-Christians attend activities where they feel comfortable and can build friendships.

Planning All-age/Multi-generational Worship Programs

For camps where there is only one main meeting area and all-age or multi-generational programming is more of a necessity, or where leadership has decided to focus specifically on this mode of programming, special care will need to be taken in shaping the program to be inclusive of all groups and to address the needs of whole families. Some worship themes lend themselves to a wide range of possibilities for all age groups. Not-yet-Christians may feel more comfortable at worship times when the activities are designed to appeal to the whole family.

- Choose an over-arching worship theme for the whole camp program that has wide appeal and flexibility, such as the days of creation, the story of Noah's ark, Bible heroes, the parables of Jesus, friends of Jesus, our wonderful bodies, etc. Divide the theme into separate components according to the number of worship programs during the camp. Be sure that each of the worship times has a clear theme or focus of its own. Identify the main thought you wish to convey.
- Select an easy-to-learn theme song that will have general appeal. If possible, work with a song leader or music team. After a time of singing, continue with a short prayer and an interest-catching activity that focuses on the chosen theme. This interest-catching activity at each worship session needs to attract the attention of the campers, especially the curiosity of the children. It could be a brief drama, a family musical group, musicians using unusual instruments, etc. It should be brief and contain an element of surprise, humour or otherwise stimulate interest. Congregations usually respond positively to activities that involve children in some way.
- The activity of an all-age service needs to change every 5-7 minutes. Consider the needs of visual and active learners as well as those who learn by hearing. Be mindful of the needs of little children and teens as well as grown-ups.
- After the interest-catcher, continue with your main story or teaching session. Think about how you can make this as lively and creative as possible, utilizing the space available and involving people to the best advantage to convey the message.
- You could also include mini-quizzes, family craft activities, creative family prayer times, and different ways to learn the Bible verse for the day. [For more ideas to help you plan the worships you could explore and develop the ideas in such books as *100 Quick and Easy Worship Ideas for Kids* by Karen Holford (Pacific Press, 2004) and *100 Creative Prayer Ideas for Kids—and Grown Ups Too* by Karen Holford (Pacific Press, 2003)].
- It can be helpful to have a worship box or folder for each family at the camp. Label the box with their family name. Put blank paper, marker pens, glue-sticks and safety scissors in each box. After the completion of a program, add the items they will need for the next worship program—craft items, photocopied sheets, or an occasional treat or surprise.
- Keep the worship programs happy, grace-filled, focused on Jesus' love, and positive. In multi-generational programs, children can be challenging. Be accepting of their presence. Use an amplification system to over-ride any commotion they may cause. Find ways to maintain clear boundaries with the children, being firm yet kind with any words of restraint that are

said. A positive, loving tone helps all worshippers, including those who are not-yet-Christians to feel safe and uplifted.

- If it is desirable to plan an alternate activity for teens, try challenging them to get involved with the worship theme. In one family camp, during a series of worships on the story of creation, teens were invited to create an animal from the natural resources on the camp site and to display their creation to all by the end of the worship time. On another occasion, they were asked to write down any questions they had about creation, then to work in groups to compile answers to the questions or to make a booklet of ideas for ways in which Christians can take better care of God's creation.
- As an alternative to the usual church service, one family camp had a series of activity stations set up where families could experience Bible stories, especially stories about Jesus, in new and exciting ways. For example, people sat—one at a time—on a wooden bench with blindfolds on. While a narrator read the story of Jesus stilling the storm, they were sprayed gently with water and a couple of strong men tilted back and forth the bench on which they were seated, mimicking the storm. At a seaside family camp, a group was invited to consider the story of creation and sculpt a man out of beach sand, recalling God's forming of Adam. These alternative worship services provided an exciting variation that inspired the campers and provided a non-threatening experience for the not-yet-Christians unfamiliar with church.

Pastoral Care of Campers

Caring for the spiritual needs of all the campers is a key part of creating a camp with maximum outreach potential. At smaller camps, it may be possible for one pastoral worker to minister to the several families who are present. Spiritual responsibilities of such a pastoral worker include befriending families, supporting them, and spending time with them (eating a meal with the family, visiting them in their accommodation, praying with them, joining them on a sports team, etc.).

At larger camps, it may be necessary to have two or more staff members whose only responsibility is to offer pastoral care to the campers. They organize daily worship and provide spiritual inspiration for the camp staff. Behind the scenes, these people pray specifically for all the campers, especially for the not-yet-Christians.

If a baptism or communion service is planned during the camp, find creative ways to help everyone understand what is happening and to be involved in the service. Family camps provide an excellent opportunity to do something different, such as holding the foot-washing service on a beach or worshipping outdoors.

Family-building Activities

A family camp always needs a variety of activities to help families build friendships. If possible, discover the skills of the not-yet-Christian campers. Involve them in a responsible role at some time during the camp. Assess potential risks and ensure the safety of everyone during all activities. Here are a few ideas that can involve a broad spectrum of skills and abilities:

- Family Olympics or sports day. Create some fun and unusual contests to add to the usual range of races, etc.
- Camp concert. Invite as many families as possible to contribute a musical item or a sketch.

- Scavenger hunt. Give each family or group a list of nature objects to find and see who can collect everything on the list first.
 - Build a family shelter. Give each family or group a simple kit of strong twine and scissors and instruct them to build a hut in the woods. They are given one hour to build a structure that would keep them fairly dry if it rained. Serve picnic lunches to families in the huts and shelters they construct or have a barbecue in the commons area amid the family-built shelters.
 - Creativity game. Give each family a bag of paper scraps, baking foil, bathroom tissue, adhesive tape, etc, and invite them to make different things. For example, choose a wedding theme and have each group make the different components of a wedding—dress a girl as a bride, a boy as a groom, make a cake, a bouquet, church and car, etc, all out of the scraps you have given them, plus anything else they can find on the camp site.
 - Outdoor trips. Plan cycling trips, hikes, outings, or beach and water activities, depending on the area where you are camping.
 - Camp fires. Include songs, stories, dramas, etc. Try cooking a meal using the camp fire (baked potatoes, roasted corn, camp bread, wieners, hot chocolate, marshmallows, etc.).
 - Family film nights. These may be especially useful when outdoor activity is restricted. Christian films, such as the *Matthew* series, introduce Jesus to the not-yet-Christians and inspire all campers. (See www.christianitytoday.com to read reviews of family films and to download useful discussion guides for the films.)
- Award ceremonies. Smaller camps could feature an award ceremony, where every camper— young and old—receives a simple award for something special they have done during the camp—showing appreciation, helping everyone feel valued, working in clean-up, carrying firewood, etc.
- Game nights. Choose games that don't require participants to have special prior knowledge, so everyone has an equal chance. Give each group a practical task to perform together, such as creating a mime to a popular song, putting a jigsaw puzzle together, decorating a cake, making a kite that will fly, building the highest tower out of disposable cups and plates, etc.

Ideas for Closing Camp

Plan a special closing for the camp. Closing might involve:

- A brief time of “camp testimonies” during which families and individuals can tell the group how this camp has moved them spiritually or blessed them and their families.
- Giving a small gift to each family, such as a book, that will encourage them to get to know God as a family, or strengthen their relationships. [For example, *Jumpstart Connections* by Karen Holford with Karen & Ron Flowers (General Conference Ministerial Resource Center, 2006)]
- Expressing public thanks for the staff at the camp, as well as those who volunteered in different capacities, especially those who are not yet church members.
- Prayer fellowship. Prayer requests could be taken and prayers offered to bless each family according to their needs. Alternatively, families could be matched in pairs to share written prayer requests with each other in ways that will not embarrass the not-yet-Christian families.
- Have campers hold hands and sing a song such as *Side By Side We Stand*, followed by a short blessing/benediction.

Staying in Touch after Family Camp

Encourage campers to stay connected to each other, especially by praying for those with whom they formed friendships at camp.

- Campers may wish to share mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses so that they can stay in contact and encourage each other.
- For smaller groups, it may be possible to send a personal letter of appreciation to each family beginning within a month of the camp and continuing periodically throughout the year.
- For more systematic follow-up for pastoral care, divide the camp families into groups (perhaps 10). Each month, contact all the families in one of the groups to see how they are doing and to ask if they have any special prayer requests. It may be easier for the not-yet-Christians to share their concerns and requests if they know that such a phone call is a regular camp follow-up activity.

Family Camp Reunion Days

Consider holding a family camp reunion day half-way through the year between camps.

- Choose a Sabbath and a suitable venue. Have a similar type of worship service and possibly the same worship leaders as were involved with the previous family camp.
- For lunch, share a pot-luck meal together, or invite families to bring a picnic.
- Plan a walk and/or nature activity for the afternoon and a social time for the evening.

Idea-Sharing

Camps vary across the world and it is helpful to share different ideas. If you have ideas for creative family camp activities, or inspiring testimonies of how camps have helped people to make a decision for Jesus, please send these to the General Conference Family Ministries Department.

References

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