



Stir-away camp: Kids get a taste of being a chef at Headfirst Cooking Camp.

MIXING IT UP

Does your child like to cook? Play computer games? Horseback-ride? At these specialty day camps, kids can have fun while feeding their interests.

BY SARA GILGORE

For Judy Slotnik's sons, last summer was more than a break from school; it was a chance to cultivate other interests—at camp. Evan, now 11, attended TIC Summer Camp in Bethesda, to learn computer programming, and Valley Mill Camp in Germantown, where he spent the week in nature studies, kayaking, and practicing archery. He and his brother, Nathan, now 13, honed their basketball and baseball skills at the local Bullis and Home Run day camps. Between the two boys, they went to eight camps.

Slotnik—who lives in Bethesda and works at the Council on State Taxation, a nonprofit on Capitol Hill—has seen the nature of summer camps change. “When my kids were younger, it was more generalized day camps,

with a little bit of everything,” she says. Now Slotnik has noticed “more specialized camps, really focusing on one thing.”

Relative to other regions of the country, Washington has a large variety of day camps, says Carey Rivers, codirector of Tips on Trips and Camps, a free advisory service. Children have more well-developed passions than in past decades, Rivers explains, and single-focus camps “give kids an opportunity to explore in-depth, even more so than they can do at a sleep-away camp.”

Attending a number of these camps consecutively has become typical, according to Paul Alagero, chief development officer at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Washington: “Very rarely do you have someone going to

one camp all summer long.”

Nationally, the number of day camps has grown by 40 percent in the past four years, says Nancy Canter, former executive director of the American Camp Association's Chesapeake Field Office. Specialized programming has also expanded, with a 31-percent increase in nature and environmental-education programs and a 40-percent increase in adventure programs. Camps that focus on health and fitness, service learning, and cooking have all become more common, according to the ACA's 2013 Emerging Issues survey.

We asked experts to recommend good local camps for special interests. These are their suggestions.

LOCAL CAMPS

MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS

Levine Music & Arts Day Camp

Budding performers ages 3½ to 12 can play instruments, take part in musical theater, sing, and dance at this 28-year-old camp. Two three-week sessions, with full- and half-day options, are tailored to specific age groups, and camps are offered in North Bethesda (Strathmore), Arlington (Westover Baptist Church), and Northwest DC (Levine Music's main campus and American University's Katzen Arts Center). Levine also offers a Teen Apprentice Program for 12-to-18-year-olds. Registration opened January 13. Full day \$1,200, half day \$830; *levinemusic.org*.

COMPUTERS AND TECHNOLOGY

TIC Summer Camp

This 33-year-old camp is a good choice for children who want to improve their computer skills while staying physically active. In four two-week sessions, which run mid-June to mid-August, campers ages 7 to 15 spend half of each day in a tech option: programming, robotics, animation, filmmaking, digital music, or digital arts. The rest of the day is devoted to sports such as soccer, Ultimate Frisbee, street hockey, and handball. Registration began December 5 for campuses in DC (Georgetown Day School), Maryland (Connelly School of the Holy Child), and Virginia (St. John Academy). Cost: \$825 plus add-on options for one-hour lessons in drama (\$30) and tennis (\$75); *ticcamp.com*.

WILDLIFE

Friends of the National Zoo Summer Safari Day Camp

Children can learn about animals, their habitats, and conservation at the National



Zoo, which hosts campers in kindergarten through seventh grade for weeklong sessions June 22 through August 14. Friends of the National Zoo members get early registration: January 27 for Premier Plus members (\$110), February 3 for Premiere (\$80) and regular (\$50 to \$60) members. General registration opens February 10. Camp cost: \$400 a week for FONZ members, \$500 for nonmembers; *nationalzoo.si.edu* (click on "education," then "classes and camps").

DETECTIVE SKILLS

Girl Scout Investigator at Camp Summer Magic

Girl Scouts in kindergarten through fifth grade can solve a mystery the week of July 13. For five days at the camp, located in Sterling, they'll collect clues, take fingerprints, follow trails, and identify "suspects" while spending time outdoors. Register by June 15. Cost: \$130. For more Girl Scouts day and sleep-away camps, go to *gscnc.org* (click on "for girls," then "camping information").

COOKING

Headfirst Cooking Camp

Does your child like to cook? At this camp, rising kindergartners through third-graders learn to follow recipes, measure ingredients, practice safe kitchen habits, and create dishes from scratch. The chefs in training create personal cookbooks while preparing food within the session's theme; topics include surprise ingredients and cupcakes. Enrollment for the one-week sessions opened in late December. Camp runs for four weeks in DC (St. Albans School and National Cathedral School), the weeks of June 22, July 6, July 20, and August 3, and two weeks in Bethesda (Mater Dei School), the weeks of June 22 and July 20. Cost: \$449 to \$459 a session; *headfirstcamps.com*.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

Camp Sonshine

Wilderness Adventures Camp

Is your child happy only when climbing a tree or swimming in a lake? During one-week sessions June 15 through August 7, kids in grades three through ten can build rain shelters and fires, canoe, zipline, mountain-bike, and drive off-road go-carts.



Older daredevils can rock-climb, bike, swim, drive ATVs, and hike in state parks. With the exception of some field trips and optional overnight excursions, the home base is in Silver Spring's Ednor Park. Registration opened December 9. Cost: \$264 to \$389 a week, depending on age and number of sessions; *campsonshine.org*.

SAILING AND EQUESTRIAN

YMCA Camp Letts

This day camp for 6-to-14-year-olds offers everything usually associated with summer camp—canoeing, archery, arts and crafts, drama. Where it shines, though, is in sailing and horseback riding. Kids who master the upper levels of sailing compete in the camp regatta, while the horseback program is led by staff with Horsemanship Association certification. In Edgewater, Maryland, Camp Letts also runs overnight and family camps. Registration is now open. Cost: \$325 a week, with upper-level sailing and equestrian programs an additional \$150 a week; *campletts.org*.

FENCING

Reston Fencers Club

While traditional summer camps might offer fencing, young duelers can really dive into the sport here. During three one-week sessions in Herndon, instructors teach épée fencing, the most straightforward style, to children who are typically ages 7 to 12. A full day includes footwork, tactical training with nationally ranked fencers, sparring, and competition. In addition to physical and intellectual development, the program aims to instill decision-making skills, confidence, and discipline. Registration is now open for the weeks of August 3 and August 10. Cost: \$360 a week, with equipment provided; *restonfc.com*.

PHOTOGRAPH OF KIDS AT ZOO BY CRISTINA SANI/THE NATIONAL ZOO