



PREPARING CAMPERS FOR THE FIRST DAY



Camp is a place for fun, growth, and new experiences, but for some campers, unfamiliar environments and unpredictable routines can feel overwhelming. As a camp counselor, your role is essential in creating a welcoming, structured, and inclusive space where all campers can feel safe, supported, and ready to engage.

This handout provides practical strategies, visual supports, and proactive approaches to help campers with exceptionalities navigate their camp experience with confidence. From pre-camp preparation and structured schedules to social stories and transition supports, these tools will help you create a camp environment where every camper can thrive.

By using clear expectations, visual aids, and flexible engagement options, you can empower campers to participate at their comfort level, build independence, and make meaningful connections. Your patience, preparation, and positive approach will make a lasting impact on their camp experience.

Let's work together to ensure that every camper has a fun, successful, and inclusive time at camp!



SOCIAL STORIES

Social stories can help campers understand what to expect at camp by breaking down the day into simple steps using clear language and visuals. This supports predictability, reduces anxiety, and prepares campers for transitions.

Why are Social Stories Helpful?

- **Reduces Anxiety & Builds Confidence** - New environments can be overwhelming, especially for campers who thrive on routine. Social stories provide a clear preview of what will happen, helping campers feel prepared and secure before they arrive.
- **Creates Predictability & Routine** - Campers may struggle with unexpected changes. Social stories use step-by-step visuals to show the sequence of daily events, making transitions smoother and reducing frustration.
- **Supports Communication & Understanding** - Some campers may have difficulty processing verbal instructions or expressing themselves. Social stories use simple language and visual cues, making it easier for them to understand expectations and communicate their needs.
- **Teaches Expected Behaviors & Social Skills** - Social interactions and camp rules can be challenging for some campers. Social stories provide clear examples of appropriate behaviors, helping them learn how to take turns, ask for help, and interact with peers.
- **Makes Transitions Easier** - Moving from one activity to another can cause stress, especially when campers are unsure of what's next. Social stories help campers anticipate changes, making transitions feel more manageable and reducing resistance.

How to Create an Effective Social Story

A well-designed social story should:

- Use clear, simple language in first-person (e.g., "I will meet my counselor").
- Include real or illustrated pictures for visual support.
- Present step-by-step descriptions of key moments in the camp day.
- Provide reassurance and encourage a positive mindset.



COUNSELOR BADGES

Name and picture badges are a simple but effective tool to help campers feel comfortable, navigate social interactions, and build confidence in their new environment. They provide visual identification, communication support, and a sense of belonging while reducing anxiety in social situations.

Why are Counselor Badges Helpful?

- **Enhances Camper Recognition & Security** - Campers may have difficulty remembering names or recognizing faces, especially in new environments. A consistent visual cue helps them locate their counselor quickly when needed.
- **Builds Trust and Comfort** - Seeing a familiar face and name on a badge reassures campers and helps them feel more at ease.
- **Assists with Transitions** - Campers can use badges as a reminder of who to follow during activities, reducing confusion and anxiety during transitions.
- **Encourages Engagement** - Campers who may be hesitant to initiate conversations can use badges as a way to learn names and approach counselors more confidently.

What to Include on a Counsellor Badge?

A well-designed counselor badge should be easy to read, visually clear, and durable for daily camp activities.

Standard Badge Components:

- Counselor's name in bold, large font.
- Clear photo of the counselor for quick recognition
- Camp logo or group name for organizational clarity.
- Pronouns (optional) to foster inclusivity .
- Icons or colors indicating the group they supervise (if applicable)



Badge Design and Placement

To ensure safety, comfort, and accessibility for all campers and staff, badge design and placement should follow these best practices:

- Use a clear, high-contrast background to make text and images easy to read.
- Laminate or use a protective holder to ensure durability throughout the camp session.
- Attach securely using a lanyard, clip, or Velcro to accommodate different comfort preferences.
- Ensure badges are visible at all times, but avoid placements that may distract or irritate campers (e.g., dangling lanyards in sensory-sensitive campers).



How Counselors Can Use Their Badges Effectively

Counselor badges are more than identification—they are tools for connection, safety, and consistency. Here's how counselors can make the most of them:

- Point to the badge when introducing themselves – “Hi, I’m Sarah, and I’ll be your counselor this week!”
- Use the badge to help campers locate them – Reinforce “If you need help, look for me and my badge.”
- Consistently wear the badge during transitions – This provides a visual cue for campers who rely on routines and predictability.
- Encourage campers to reference badges when asking for assistance – This builds independence and confidence in seeking help.

MEET MY CAMP COUNSELORS FACT SHEETS

A Meet My Camp Counselor fact sheet is a creative means for helping campers become familiar with their counselor before camp begins. This sheet introduces the counselor in a friendly, visual format, making it easier for campers to recognize and feel comfortable with them upon arrival.

Why is a Counselor Fact Sheet Helpful?

- **Reduces Anxiety** - Seeing a familiar face before camp starts helps campers feel more at ease.
- **Builds Trust and Comfort** - Campers can learn about their counselor's interests, making it easier to connect.
- **Encourages social engagement** - Helps start conversations by giving campers topics to talk about.

What to Include on a Meet My Counselor Fact Sheet?

A counselor fact sheet should be simple, visually engaging, and easy to understand. You can include some of the following:

Counselor Photo & Name

Clear, smiling photo of the counselor - A headshot or action photo of them participating in a camp activity.

Large, bold name - Easy for campers to recognize.

Fun Introduction

"Hi! I'm [Counselor's Name], and I'm so excited to meet you at camp!"

Counselor's role at camp - (e.g., Group Leader, Sports Coach, Art Instructor).

Fun Facts About the Counselor

Favorite Camp Activity: (e.g., "I love leading nature hikes and campfire songs!")

Favorite Food: (e.g., "Pizza is my favorite snack!")

Favorite Song or Music: (e.g., "I love listening to Taylor Swift!")

Favorite Hobby: (e.g., "In my free time, I enjoy painting and playing soccer.")

Ways I Can Help You at Camp

If you need help, you can...

Ask me a question

Point to me if you need help

Show me with your hands or use your device

I Can help With:

Finding your group

Showing you where things are

Helping with activities

Taking a break when you need one

COUNSELOR FACT SHEET



Hi! My name is Megan,
and I am so excited
to meet you at camp!

Fun Facts About Me



Favorite Camp Activity: I love leading nature hikes and campfire songs!



Favorite Food: Pizza is my favorite snack!



Favorite Song or Music: I love listening to Taylor Swift!



Favorite Hobby: In my free time, I enjoy painting and playing soccer.

If you need help, you can...

- Ask me a question
- Point to me if you need help
- Show me with your hands or use your device

VISUAL SCHEDULES

A visual schedule is an essential tool for helping campers with exceptionalities understand the structure of their day. It provides predictability, reduces anxiety, and helps with transitions by clearly outlining what activities will happen and when.

Why are Visual Schedules are Helpful?

- **Creates predictability** – Helps campers know what to expect, reducing uncertainty.
- **Supports transitions** – Provides a clear beginning and end for each activity.
- **Enhances independence** – Allows campers to refer to the schedule instead of relying on verbal reminders.
- **Accommodates different learning styles** – Uses pictures, words, and colors to suit various communication needs

How to Design a Visual Schedule

A well-structured visual schedule should be:

- **Picture-based** – Use icons, real photos, or symbols to represent each activity.
- **Simple and easy to read** – Use clear labels and bold text to help campers understand.
- **Color-coded** – Different colors can represent different types of activities (e.g., green for outdoor, blue for quiet time).
- **Portable or posted** – Can be a large wall poster, a personal laminated card, or a flip schedule on a ring for easy carrying.

Example Visual Schedule for a Camp Day

Arrival & Check-In – 9:00 AM
Arts & Crafts – 9:30 AM
Outdoor Walk – 10:15 AM
Snack Break – 10:45 AM
Group Activity (Sports, Music, Dance) – 11:15 AM
Lunch & Quiet Time – 12:00 PM
Choice Time (Play, Reading, Puzzles) – 1:00 PM
Water Play or Sensory Break – 2:00 PM
Closing Circle & Wrap-Up – 2:45 PM
Goodbye & Pick-Up – 3:00 PM



PRE-CAMP VISIT

For some campers, new environments can feel overwhelming. If possible, allowing campers to visit camp before their first day can help them feel more comfortable and confident when they arrive.

Why are Pre-Camp Visits Helpful?

- **Reduces Anxiety** – Seeing the camp in advance helps campers feel more familiar with the space, making the first day less stressful.
- **Creates Predictability** – Walking through key areas gives campers a visual understanding of where things are and what to expect.
- **Builds Comfort with Transitions** – Knowing where important locations are (e.g., bathrooms, quiet areas, activity spaces) helps campers move through the day with ease.
- **Encourages Positive First Impressions** – Meeting counselors and seeing friendly faces before camp starts creates a sense of safety and connection.

What to Include in a Pre-Camp Visit

Drop-Off & Pick-Up Zone – Show campers where they will arrive and leave each day, and explain what happens during check-in and check-out.

Activity Rooms & Outdoor Spaces – Walk through craft areas, game spaces, sports fields, and sensory-friendly areas so campers feel comfortable navigating them.

Quiet Areas – Point out designated calm spaces where campers can take a break if they feel overwhelmed.

Bathrooms & Hydration Stations – Show campers where they can use the restroom and get water, reducing confusion during the day.



SUMMARY AND TAKEAWAYS

Camp can be an exciting yet overwhelming experience for some campers, particularly those who benefit from structure and predictability. By incorporating preparation strategies, visual supports, and personalized accommodations, camp counselors can create an environment where all campers feel comfortable, confident, and ready to participate. Providing pre-camp visits, social stories, and visual schedules helps campers anticipate what to expect, reducing anxiety and making transitions smoother.

Establishing predictable routines and clear schedules offers a sense of security, while visual supports such as name badges, maps, and structured activity schedules enhance independence and understanding.

Ensuring flexible engagement opportunities allows campers to participate in ways that feel comfortable for them, whether through alternative communication methods, sensory accommodations, or modified activities. Since transitions between activities can be challenging, clear preparation, transition cues, and designated quiet spaces can help ease stress and prevent frustration. Social interactions can also be a source of anxiety for some campers, so using structured introductions, peer modeling, and turn-taking activities helps create positive social experiences.

Above all, camp should be a safe, inclusive, and supportive space where every camper feels valued and encouraged. By proactively implementing predictability, visual supports, and flexible engagement, counselors can foster a welcoming environment where all campers can fully enjoy and participate in camp with confidence and excitement!

