



Youth Camp Planning



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A “goofy” photo of excited campers at the Fire Station during Oberlin Expedition camp, one of the camps offered by the Oberlin Heritage Center. Photo courtesy of the Oberlin Heritage Center.

Many museums are gearing up for “camp” season this time of year. Camps mean different things to different organizations, but ideally they all mean hands-on learning and FUN for kids. The Oberlin Heritage Center has offered youth day camps for over 15 years. If you are considering starting, or evaluating, a camp program, here are a few notes that might help.

First, should you offer a camp?

Between preparing activities, creating flyers, handling registrations, purchasing materials, teaching camp, and following up with evaluations, camps require a considerable amount of time and resources. Clarify ahead of time what you want participants to gain, and what you want to gain (community connections, revenue, good press, new volunteers, fresh programming). Also consider the following:

- Is there actually a need in your community for new youth programs? For what age groups? Can you offer something that no one else is offering?
- Do you have the experienced staff, educators, and volunteers available to lead a camp? Keep in mind that you should have at least two adults present at all times. Teens can be great helpers, but they can't be your only helpers.
- Do you have the space and is it kid-friendly? (bathrooms, craft area, playground)
- Do you have a budget to cover expenses and staffing beyond the registration revenue?

Who are you serving?

When deciding on your target audience, consider community needs, interests,

organizational resources, and staff training. Most families seek camp experiences for when school is out, including summer, spring break, and maybe teacher training days. Many parents want full day experiences that cover their work hours, but you will have to decide what your institution can feasibly offer, including extended drop-off and pick-up times.

The Oberlin Heritage Center offers camps for children ages 8-13, along with occasional camps for teens. Our camps run from 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and we have tried 1-day, 2-day, and 5-day camps, each with its pros and cons. Based on our staff and space limitations, we typically accept up to 17 camp participants.

What are we going to do?!

If you don't already know what topics you want to offer, or if you are thinking about changing things up, there are several areas to look for inspiration:

- Expertise & Passion – What are your coolest stories or collections? Did someone recently travel to China? Is there a volunteer who knows how to flint knap? Use the resources and energy you already have at hand.
- Survey – Ask current program participants what topics they are interested in.
- Curriculum – What topics do clubs, such as Scouts, need to address?
- Field Trips – Behind-the-scenes exploration of community institutions is fun for people of all ages. We have arranged walking field trips to the library, newspaper, city court, bowling alley, cemetery, art museum, park, etc.
- Popularity – What are kids watching,

reading, or playing right now? When the Percy Jackson book series was popular, we offered an equally popular Ancient Greece camp. (And while it may not be Oberlin history, getting kids thinking about history and culture is always my mission, and no one else in town is offering similar programming). As for other topics, trains, animals, and historic foodways never lose their magic (although teaching children to cut apples can take years off of your life).

Attracting Participants

It's time to spread the word about your awesome new program! When designing flyers and pr, keep in mind that parents will use your words and pictures to try to convince their kids to sign up. In addition to the fun stuff, also include sections for emergency contacts, medical issues, photo permission, cost, discounts, sack lunches, minimum registration, cancellations, etc. For a sample flyer, visit www.oberlinheritagecenter.org or email me at tourinfo@oberlinheritage.org. Get your flyers and press releases out to your members, area schools, libraries, homeschool groups, churches, clubs, community events, past participants, media contacts, and online calendars.

Happy Camper

It's too difficult to summarize a day of camp in a short article, but here are some hints I've picked up over the years:

- Give brief weekly agendas to parents. They like to be able to talk with their son or daughter about what happened at camp.
- Go over rules regarding safety and respect on Day One.
- Build in snack and break times.
- Have a cell phone and first aid kit with you at all times. ■