

# City ChicagolandExtra

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## It's summer fun with a message

Vacation Bible schools aim to be more than cheap day care, offering fun, religion, civic service and a respite for parents

By Amanda Marrazzo | SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Amy Zabka, 9, and her sister Hannah, 4, have begun making the rounds of weeklong vacation Bible schools, their family's way of limiting the girls' TV and gadget time while keeping the peace at home over the summer.

One recent morning, when there was no Bible camp, their mother, Johnni Zabka, 41, lamented, "Already this morning, they are fighting over what to watch on TV... I am done with the 'iCarly' and the 'Dora.' It's just enough."

Like many Chicago-area families, the Zabkas, of Batavia, turn to church-based summer schools as an alternative to high-priced child care or specialty sports, theater and music camps.

Some summer day camps, such as those offered at privately run health clubs, range from \$80 to \$250 a week. YMCA camps average about \$145 to \$200 weekly, while park district programs usually cost \$50 to \$80 for three hours and \$130 to \$165 for all-day camps.

Bible camps, typically run by volunteers, often are as inexpensive as \$25 a child, and some are free. For families who cannot afford fees, many churches offer scholarships.

"If I had to send (Hannah and Amy) to a baby sitter, it would cost me more per day than it does for the entire week at a vacation Bible school," said Zabka, adding her children will attend three to five church camps over the summer. She loves that her children are exposed to Christian-themed crafts, games, stories and music and that the camps allow her time for her four home-based businesses.

When you weigh in "the value and what the volunteers do and for what your kids get out of it," it's an easy choice, said Zabka, who shops online to find the best camps with the best times to fit her needs.

Beginning July 26, the younger Zabka girls will attend the High Seas Expedition Bible camp at Batavia United Methodist Church, where their mother is camp director



Aryn Silas shows off an arts and crafts project during the free summer Bible camp at Langley Avenue Church of God. The camp focused on recycling and other Earth-friendly activities.

### DAY CAMP ASSISTANCE

The Parkways Foundation, the nonprofit arm of the Chicago Park District, has launched a Send a Kid to Camp fundraising campaign to give youths whose families do not have the resources an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of summer camp, including swimming, sports, arts and crafts and field trips. The campaign asks for donations of \$100, which can underwrite one scholarship for a child to attend camp this summer or attend one of the Park District's after-school camps.

Parkways also recently awarded a \$400,000 grant to the Park District's summer camp scholarship fund, which it said helps more than 2,300 children receive camp scholarships.

"It is important that children are still afforded the opportunity to attend summer camp during these tough economic times," said Parkways executive director Brenda Palm.

To help send a kid to camp, visit [parkways.org](http://parkways.org) or call 312-742-4816.

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