

DEAR PARENTS:

We're so glad you've signed up your child for an exciting week on Avalanche Ranch. This VBS program will give your child a wild ride through God's Word.

You'll notice that things at Avalanche Ranch are...well, a little different from what you might be used to. For one thing, elementary kids will be in mixed-age groups with other children who have finished kindergarten through grade 5. These small groups, called Ranch Crews, are led by adults or teenagers who love children and love the Lord. Ranch Crews are an important part of Avalanche Ranch! But you still might have some doubts...

My child won't come if he can't be with his friends. While it's true that your child might not get to be with his or her very best friend, your child *will* have wonderful opportunities to make new friends and interact with a new group of children. Most of us assume that age-graded classes are the best way to go, simply because that has been our only experience. However, studies indicate that children choose to play with children of other ages. Studies show that children learn as much—or more—when they're linked with kids of different ages. In fact, one study observed that children naturally chose to play with other children their age only 6 percent of the time. They played with children who were at least one year older or younger than they were 55 percent of the time. Encourage your child to try something different—he or she might be surprised!

My child won't like being with little kids. Parents are continually surprised that, after a few days of VBS, their older children *love* this newfound role! Suddenly, they're the “cool” big kids with younger children looking up to them. And while your child is helping younger kids with simple tasks like reading and writing, he or she is having the chance to serve and demonstrate Christ's love! It's a meaningful way to discover—and practice—the joy of service.

My child will get trampled by those bigger kids. Avalanche Ranch is carefully designed for groups of multi-age children. That means games are noncompetitive, team-building activities (brilliantly disguised as wildly fun games) in which your child's abilities will shine. In fact, many games are designed to *highlight* the importance of smaller kids. It's more likely that your younger child will be loved, affirmed, and doted upon by his or her older crew mates.

You'll have to water down the Bible lessons so everyone can learn. Since Avalanche Ranch doesn't rely on more traditional teaching methods (like fill-in-the-blank puzzles or word searches), kids *experience* Bible stories in powerful, life-changing ways. And that's something kids of *all* ages will enjoy...and remember. Then crew leaders gather with kids for small-group discussion. These are questions that apply to every child but may touch each child at a different level. For example, on Day 3 as we learn that God is strong, a crew leader might ask, “When do you depend on God's strength?” A younger child might respond, “During a scary storm,” while an older child with more experience with life's challenges may say, “When my friends are all doing something I know is wrong.”

Millions of children have experienced this multi-age approach with Group's VBS, with surprise and delight at the outcome. Children's ministry experts agree that combining ages has numerous benefits: teaching children to work together, experiencing what it means to be a family, and serving others in love. However, the most important factor in making this program a success is your attitude. If your child has doubts, reassure him or her that this is a wonderful opportunity to try something new. Your support will speak volumes to the children we're serving.

We look forward to ministering to your child at Avalanche Ranch.

Avalanche Ranch Director

