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Guide 2021



Welcome back

What camps learned in 2020 to prepare for this year



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Health benefits *of* camp

By Melissa Erickson

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“The pandemic has taken a significant toll on children, the mental and physical effects of which we are just beginning to realize.”

DR. LAURA BLAISDELL

Whether they’re honing their skills with music lessons or learning to appreciate nature, summer camp is an opportunity for overprogrammed and overprotected children to learn and grow surrounded by caring adults who help nurture and guide them.

“The magic of the camp experience is that it is fun with friends, while children experience — often in a natural setting — social-emotional and physical growth in a setting that provides a break from the world of screens and technology,” said Dr. Laura Blaisdell, a board-certified, public-health-trained pediatrician and advocate with expertise in vaccine policy and camp medicine.

The health and wellness benefits of summer camp vary greatly, but one of the most obvious is the freedom of being outside and physically active at a traditional camp. It may be a stereotype, but many summer campers still enjoy playing tug of war, swimming in the lake and hiking in the woods.

That physical exercise is needed, especially by children who spend their days in front of screens. Nearly 20% of children in the United States are obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which puts

them at risk for developing diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, breathing problems such as asthma and other issues including anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

The childhood obesity epidemic is the result of many factors including dietary patterns, eating habits, sleep routines and food preferences, Blaisdell said.

“But in the traditional summer camp program, children leave the home environment and join a highly active, outdoor experience and have different food choices. These holistic experiences can have both emotional and physical healthy impacts for many campers,” she said.

Camp gets kids moving.

“In many ways, the essence of camp is play. The pandemic has taken a significant toll on children, the mental and physical effects of which we are just beginning to realize. In 2021, camp can provide an experience for children where play brings health benefits and healing,” Blaisdell said.

Food plays a big role in the communal summer camp experience, and camp menus have evolved from hot dogs and s’mores to include more healthful options.

“Camps often serve well-balanced meals, offer salad bars, healthy from-scratch preparation and modeling by both peers and staff of healthy eating habits,” Blaisdell said. Plus,

campers are mindful of children’s allergy and dietary restrictions.

During a normal school year children participate in recess, gym and extracurricular sports and activities, which have been reduced by virtual and hybrid learning.

While the educational programs that kids experience throughout the year cannot be replicated in the camp setting, camp can help curb summer learning loss.

“Camps have evolved to offer academic support, tutoring and are well-positioned to assist campers as they prepare for the 2021-22 school year,” Blaisdell said.

Academics are just one part of a child’s development.

“Kids are learning social-emotional relations and physical education that is part of camp’s essential mission,” she said.

In addition to encouraging healthy living and building social and emotional skills, summer camp also promotes personal evolution.

“Increasingly, as children lack diverse interactions with role models and peers, camp provides a model for children to learn about themselves, their world, and a develop a sense of autonomy and resilience in a safe environment,” Blaisdell said. “The invaluable engagement with non-guardian adults is paramount to children’s self-understanding positive lifelong lessons.”

Free virtual *summer camps* for kids

By **Melissa Erickson**

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Virtual camps can't watch your kids for you, but they offer fun, interactive activities that will keep them occupied. Here are a few free virtual camps can keep a child's mind active and — hopefully — a parent's stress level under control.

CAMP WONDEROPOLIS camp.wonderopolis.org

Learn why are bowling shoes slippery, how a species becomes endangered and more with Camp Wonderopolis, an online learning destination that focuses on STEM- and literacy-building content and activities. Designed for children of all ages, Camp Wonderopolis can help kids build vocabulary, science knowledge, reading comprehension, critical thinking and other literacy skills. Parents and educators can even sign up as camp counselors.

GIRLS WHO CODE girlswhocode.com

Enjoy a supportive sisterhood while learning computer science skills with the two-week Girls Who Code Summer Immersion Program for girls and non-binary students in the ninth to 11th grades. The camp is an opportunity to get a look at the tech world through guest speakers

and virtual classrooms. Participants will learn to code with projects using HTML, CSS and JavaScript.

VARSITY TUTORS varsitytutors.com

From June through August Varsity Tutors offers weeklong virtual summer camps for ages 5 to 18 in fun and educational subjects ranging from math bootcamp to origami for beginners, test prep to podcasting. The easy-to-search website narrows choices by age and subject.

CAMP PBS KIDS PBS.org/parents/summer

Camp PBS KIDS makes summer an opportunity to learn with ideas, tips, games, activities, reading lists and printables focused around different themes and featuring some familiar characters such as Daniel Tiger and Buddy Tyrannosaurus.

CAMP KINDA campkinda.org

Camp Kinda is a virtual summer experience designed to keep kids in grades K through 8 engaged, curious and having fun at home. Sign up to receive three to four hours' worth of activities each day that are connected to a weekly theme such as unlocking the mysteries of history or the world's craziest sports.

SUMMER CAMP GUIDE 2021

Health benefits of camp2

Free virtual summer camps for kids3

When you can't afford camp5

Lessons learned from 20206

Upsides to post-pandemic camps9

Will summer camps survive?10

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WHEN YOU CAN'T AFFORD CAMP



BIGSTOCK

By **Melissa Erickson**

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From forming valuable friendships to learning worthwhile new skills, the benefits of summer camp may be priceless, but participating comes with a price tag.

“Unfortunately, summer camp costs have increased for both day and overnight camps and have become a barrier for attendance for many families, especially those from low-income households,” said Kyle Chones, consultant with AskTheCampGuy, a summer camp blog.

In 2019, summer camp costs ranged from \$200 to \$800 per week for day camps, and between \$600 to over \$2,000 per week for overnight resident camps, according to the American Camp Association.

2020 was much different due to COVID-19, which forced many camps to provide an at-home experience, Chones said. Some virtual programs cost the same as in-person sessions while others were less expensive or free.

With financial aid and a few tips and tricks, the experience of summer camp is attainable to most children, Chones said.

Families in need who want to apply for camp scholarships and discounts should start their search early, he said. When doing research about what type of camp is a good fit for a child, also look into what types of scholarships are available and what the application process looks like.

“If you have found a camp for your child, stay

“When camps begin awarding aid, they typically must award that aid until there is none left or by the end of the fiscal year. As a result, there are exceptions in which a camp may offer partial aid to a family that may not check all the criteria.”

KYLE CHONES,
ASKTHECAMPGUY

informed with updates on news or social media as most camps open financial aid typically in the fall ahead of the winter holiday season,” Chones said.

In addition to often operating on a first-come, first-served basis, funding is usually limited and families must meet specific criteria to qualify.

“For example, when I worked at the American Diabetes Association, we hosted medically focused camps across the country offering ‘camperships’ or aid to about 40% of families to help with their high insurance costs by providing free supplies and medical care for the week,” Chones said.

Depending on the type of camp or organization a camper is applying to, aid may vary from full to partial scholarships. Campers can apply for specially designated funds, which depend on the donation or grant and can be specific to youth of a certain demographic, Chones said.

“Sometimes, personal fundraising is a requirement for families applying for aid,” Chones said. Bake sales, car washes or babysitting are all ways young people can raise funds for summer camp.

“If parents are required to provide a description of why they need aid, sharing their story of their child will help,” he said.

Camp directors and staff will often take into consideration personal stories and circumstances, not just the pure financial need.

“As a former camp director there have been so many instances where I have read very heartwarming and sometimes heartbreaking stories about families wanting to attend camp because, like us, they know all too well that camp does change lives,” Chones said.

If you think summer camp is out of your reach financially, think again.

“Always apply, because you will never know unless you apply,” Chones said. “When camps begin awarding aid, they typically must award that aid until there is none left or by the end of the fiscal year. As a result, there are exceptions in which a camp may offer partial aid to a family that may not check all the criteria.”

It’s worth the stretch.

“Without question camp is 100% worth the financial sacrifice because you are investing in the most precious and sacred experience, your children’s future. It provides a safe, fun and new environment where they will learn new social skills, build self-confidence and experience traditions, build lifelong friendships and engage in activities that otherwise they would never experience if they had not attended,” Chones said.

Lessons learned from

By Melissa Erickson

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As COVID-19 took hold of America last spring, summer camps were in the unique position to take the lead in figuring out ways to safely and effectively have groups of children and adults come together.

“We knew we wouldn’t have a vaccine when summer started. We also knew that after months of sheltering at home camp was going to be more important than ever before for children,” said Tom Rosenberg, president and CEO of the American Camp Association.

In April, before the threat of COVID-19 was understood, the American Camp Association hired an environmental health consulting firm to examine whether and how camps could open safely.

“Camps have operated through other medical emergencies, including the Spanish Flu and polio outbreaks. We knew the authorities would be overwhelmed so we had to step up,” Rosenberg said.

The American Camp Association and the YMCA of the USA, together with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as state and local health departments, created a field guide for summer camps. This resource highlights the non-pharmaceutical interventions that made it possible for camps to open.

“We looked at the granular details of what needed to be done to be in compliance,” Rosenberg said.

Kind of like a rules of the road for summer camp, the field guide advised things that are now commonplace such as masking and social distancing, screening and quarantining, holding activities outdoors and concentrating people in small cohorts.

“What we learned was that these non-pharmaceutical interventions can be implemented successfully. As we prepare for another safe summer, we know we can do it if we follow the field guide,” said Rosenberg.

He is optimistic about this summer. Vaccinations have started, and more affordable testing should become more widely available, he said.

COVID-19 policies

» Across the country, camp staff learned how adaptable they could be.

“We’re proud to say that we operated our traditional day camp, Lake Stockwell Day Camp, and a new, extended day program, Camp Matocky, during the 2020 summer with zero reported cases of COVID-19,” said Greg Keresztury, chief operating officer, YMCA of the

“Most camps will get through 2021 or 2022. I think the success has shown many camp leaders to be racist, inclusive and justic
to be work that cont

SARAH KURTZ MCKINNON

summer 2020

Pines in Medford, New Jersey. “We made substantial changes to our policies and procedures around everything from group interactions, meal-time operations, cleaning protocols and procedures and so much more. Our staff showed incredible fidelity to our safety protocols, and the campers adapted and were able to still have a blast at camp.”

Summer 2020 may have been a challenge, but with a can-do attitude and the lessons learned camp staff are on the right path.

“We know there is a way forward,” Rosenberg said.

“We can operate a fantastic camp experience full of growth opportunities for campers despite the pandemic conditions,” Keresztury said. “Now that we know that our safety and mitigation efforts are effective, we can focus on expanding and doing more with the program. For example, when conditions improve, we will be able

to add more to the camper experience, through overnight camp.”

The pandemic showed that summer camps aren’t just around to give kids a fun summer, said Sarah Kurtz McKinnon, co-founder and CEO of the Summer Camp Society.

“They are in many ways the backbone of our summer economy. They provide crucial child care to working families,” she said.

Racism



Pandemic aside, a more long-term impact of the 2020 summer was how it spurred the fight for social justice, Kurtz McKinnon said.

“Camp is a microcosm of the greater world, and that we as a camp community need to do more to not just be

not racist but be anti-racist,” she said.

In most cases summer camp is an overwhelmingly white experience, and that’s something some camp directors are thinking about.

“Racism will not just pass. There’s not a scientific solution to eradicate it. Most camps will get through COVID-19 and return in 2021 or 2022. I think the summer of 2020 has deeply shown many camp leaders that establishing an anti-racist, inclusive and justice-oriented culture is going to be work that continues for decades. However, this is work that camp leaders are motivated to tackle,” Kurtz McKinnon said.

While this may be a “dark and challenging time, we have a lot of hope. If we do it right as safely as possible, we will be able to help reclaim the interpersonal, social and emotional skills lost” due to the isolation of the pandemic, Rosenberg said.

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Upsides to post-pandemic camps

By Melissa Erickson

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Summer camp will offer children overwhelmed and exhausted by the pandemic a place to come together, have fun and heal from the emotional and social roller coaster of the past year. Consider that one of a few silver linings of the upcoming summer camp season.

“Kids need summer camp more than ever right now. They need the social interaction, the shared experience,” said Jake Schwartzwald, director at Everything Summer, a New York-based educational and gap consulting company. “Done safely summer camp is the perfect place to reconnect with other campers, a place where kids can stretch themselves and experience independence after having been isolated in their family pods.”

The appreciation and sense of gratitude campers, counselors and staff will feel is another summer camp silver lining, Schwartzwald said.

“Children get used to going to camp. They grow up going to camp. It’s expected and easy to take for granted. This year there will be an additional layer of

gratitude. Kids who get to go will feel, ‘Wow! This place really is special and I appreciate it,’” he said.

It will be a challenge for camp directors to figure out the details of how to make it work, but “it’s not a chore when it feels like a gift you’re giving,” Schwartzwald said.

Camp is a safe place for children to grow emotionally, socially and developmentally, which is something many people feel is absolutely essential right now, he said.

Summer camp is not just about climbing walls and canoeing, building robots or making music. “It represents more. Camp culture represents how a young person grows. It’s about independence and caring for others,” Schwartzwald said.

For example, archery is not just about archery. It’s about learning a new skill. A shared meal is not just about eating but about coming together and community building, he said.

Another hopeful prospect is that this can be a great year for an older camper to join a camp community without some of the hurdles that naturally present themselves in these cases.

As a new environment summer camp can be a

challenge for “older” new campers to assimilate. If a camp begins accepting children at 8, that’s when many campers start. Campers who are 9 or 10 must navigate their way into already defined groups of kids who have previously been at camp together, Schwartzwald said.

Because of COVID-19 many camps were unable to run last year, so now many camps have almost two seasons’ worth of new campers: those who would have started last summer and those who would naturally start this summer, Schwartzwald said.

The increase in numbers of new campers is another silver lining.

“It makes for a situation where there are more new kids to make friends with and fewer barriers to break down. You’re in it together,” he said.

Across the board, everyone will have a greater adjustment to camp life this summer because everyone has been at home isolated from others.

“It’s going to be a pretty dramatic transition for all. Even returning campers may feel homesick, nervous and new, but camps are attuned to this. They are anticipating it and are being proactive about figuring out how to best offer support,” Schwartzwald said.

Will SUMMER CAMPS SURVIVE?



By Melissa Erickson

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C OVID-19 financially devastated the summer camp industry in 2020, and the struggle to stay afloat continues. Which summer camps will survive and thrive and which won't depends on a variety of factors.

In a normal year about 26 million kids participate in camps throughout the United States, according to the American Camp Association. About 19.5 million children and young people missed out on the in-person day and overnight camps in 2020 because of the pandemic, but about 6.5 million children were able to participate with health and safety measures in place.

For many families summer camp is a place where children learn new skills, make lifelong friends and taste independence for the first time, but it's also a big business. Only about 20% to 30% of summer camps operated last summer, taking a big bite out of what is usually an \$18 billion industry, according to the American Camp Association.

Camps that survived not only the Spanish Flu but the polio epidemic, the Great Depression and other obstacles may close unless they make adjustments, said Stephen Gray Wallace, a school psychologist, long-time camp professional, and president and director of the Center for Adolescent Research and Education.

"It's a heartbreaking loss for many camps that are closing, possibly more so for current and former campers and staff," he said. "Those still committed to attending or working at camp now need to find alternatives, though certainly it's difficult to replicate what they have lost."

How camps can adapt to the pandemic to offer what families need in 2021 begins with a can-do mindset, said Wallace, who covered the subject in an online article titled "Where There's a Will."

"Camps that saw 2020 as a binary choice — we open and run 'our' program or we don't open at all — likely did not open and will have to work hard, be creative and willing to reimagine what their summer camp experience looks and feels like," he said.

Most camps that did open chose a middle

path, modifying their programs and embracing virtual options when necessary.

Camps that opened in 2020 head into the 2021 season with a blueprint for how to run meaningful and safe summer programs for kids, Wallace said.

"The potential availability of a vaccine should lighten the load, but still those camps need to be on guard," he said.

Camps that did not open in 2020 have a steeper hill to climb, he said. These camps will have to figure out how to transform existing programs into ones that recognize the challenges of operating during a pandemic.

"Hopefully, they have spent the last six or seven months communicating with camp families to assess their interests, needs and concerns," Wallace said.

In addition to following local and state guidance, summer camps will also have to comply with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Camp Association, which accredits camps on up to 300 standards for health, safety and program quality.

"The American Camp Association has done a fantastic job of coaching camps through these difficult times, offering resources, information and data to help them succeed," Wallace said.

Operating within a protective bubble with screening protocols and rigid sanitizing guidelines can work, but it's impossible to be 100% safe.

"We learned from many 2020 protocols that banned visitors and started with small pods of campers and staff, merging them over time to create a whole community," Wallace said.

Camps that won't survive are ones that are unable to reimagine summer camp during a global pandemic and make changes to accommodate the new risks and fears of camp families and kids.

Camp people are different in that for many or most of them it's not just a job; it's a way of life. Plus, they are up for the challenge, Wallace said.

"Being a camp director is all about managing risk, at all levels. This leaves them especially prepared to tackle the risks associated with COVID-19, all the while finding new and unique ways to offer meaningful, memorable experiential learning experiences for youth," he said.

"We learned from many 2020 protocols that banned visitors and started with small pods of campers and staff, merging them over time to create a whole community."

STEPHEN GRAY WALLACE,
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