

What will summer camp look like this year?

2 April 2021, by Dennis Thompson



Splashing in a pool. Hiking through fresh green forests. Making macaroni art. Stitching together a leather wallet. Knocking a kickball around.

It's nearly time for summer [camp](#), and the experience is expected to be especially important for America's children because of the pandemic.

"We really feel like summer camps are a huge opportunity for kids to disconnect from screens that they've all had to be on during their [academic year](#)," said Dr. Sara Bode, a pediatrician who helped write the American Academy of Pediatrics' summer camp guidance for 2021. "Summer camps offer this social and emotional enriching learning opportunity for kids that is critical."

The goal of day and overnight camps across the United States this year will be to restore some normalcy to the lives of children who saw their lives upturned by COVID-19, said Tom Rosenberg, president and CEO of the American Camp Association.

"The pandemic has really robbed all of us, but

especially kids most of all. There's a lot of discussion around very real academic losses these kids have suffered, but I would also argue that not nearly enough has been said about their social and emotional losses," Rosenberg said.

But the pandemic is still ongoing, and parents can rightly be expected to have concerns about their kids' safety while away for either a day, a week or a month.

Campers' health is always part of planning any day or overnight camp, Rosenberg noted. For example, in 2019 camps were concerned about kids not being up to date on their vaccinations, inviting a potential resurgence of measles.

As expected, this year such health concerns will take on even greater importance. Guidelines from the AAP and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offer a list of factors that parents should keep in mind when choosing a day or overnight camp for their kids:

Will kids need to be tested for COVID prior to camp or during camp?

Many overnight camps will require a COVID test before kids show up, as part of the required health checklist, Bode and Rosenberg said.

Some camps might also ask families to shelter in place with their children for a week to 10 days beforehand, to limit the kids' potential exposure to the coronavirus.

Children might be tested again upon arrival, and again on the fourth or fifth day, Rosenberg said.

"You're trying with overnight camp to create a bubble," Rosenberg said. "Once the kids arrive and all that testing is complete, there's no one really leaving and no one really coming into that camp."

Day camps also might require testing, but screening will be trickier because the kids are going

home every day, experts said.

How will kids be kept safe at camp? What might be the planned response if a camper or staffer develops COVID symptoms or tests positive?

Day and overnight camps are being asked to implement the same protection measures as everyone else—wearing masks indoors and maintaining social distancing.

Kids also will be "cohorted," or placed into a group with whom they will remain throughout camp, Bode and Rosenberg said. This will allow for quick isolation and contact tracing if a child or staffer develops symptoms of COVID-19.

"In a day camp, they're going to have their activities together every day with that group, with the same staff dedicated to them," Rosenberg said. "They're going to eat together. They're going to play together. It's going to be a place where these kids can really get to know each other and build relationships in person, something they haven't done for over a year."

Overnight camps also are expected to cohort kids, but these groups might be expanded to include others once the camp "bubble" has been formed. These camps will need to have additional measures in place to isolate campers if someone becomes infected.

"If a camper in one small cohort is symptomatic, that camper and anyone in that cohort exposed to that individual can be separated, and the rest of camp can continue," Rosenberg said.

Both day and overnight camps should be prepared to take other safety measures, such as promoting hand hygiene, regular cleaning and disinfection, and adequate ventilation of indoor areas.

Are there plans to keep in more continuous contact with parents back home, to reassure them about their kids' safety?

Don't be shy as a parent to ask for regular updates about camp, whether your kids are attending a day or overnight camp, experts said.

"Right now with the state we're in with COVID and the pandemic, that is absolutely reasonable as a parent to ask—how are you going to provide updates? And if they weren't planning on it, then you can be the parent that says, well, I want them," said Bode, medical director of Nationwide Children's Hospital's Care Connection School-Based Health and Mobile Clinics in Columbus, Ohio.

That communication should already be taking place for the parents of returning campers, Rosenberg added.

"Camps need to be communicating with parents now, in the runup to the summer, to sort of set their expectations about what will prescreening look like, what will we be asking of you in the summer of '21 that we didn't before," Rosenberg said.

Will camps be asked to keep an eye on community transmission in their area, and alter their protocols if necessary?

Tracking COVID-19 transmission in the [local community](#) will be essential for day camps, Rosenberg said.

"For day camps, it's really important to understand what's happening in the local community, so certainly camp directors are monitoring that. They're working with their local health department officials to stay on top of it from their perspective, and continuously improving their screening practices," Rosenberg said.

Overnight camps will be more able to form a protective bubble that isn't subject to community transmission, if parents do their part by sheltering in place ahead of time, Rosenberg added.

"The research is showing that kids can come from higher transmission areas safely and effectively and participate in overnight camp if the family follows a multi-layered mitigation strategy," Rosenberg said.

Will camp staffers be vaccinated?

It's not unreasonable to expect camp staff to have

gotten their COVID-19 vaccinations, because they are considered essential workers, Bode and Rosenberg said.

"We would be hopeful by summer they would be, because camp staff are in that category of child care, so they should have been prioritized to get vaccination," Bode said.

"We've been fortunate that the CDC has recognized that camp staff, like day care workers and other kinds of child educators, need to be vaccinated if possible," Rosenberg said. "They want to encourage vaccination of all these essential frontline workers, so camps are encouraging camp staff to take advantage of opportunities to be vaccinated. That's all happening right now in many states."

Vaccine supplies are starting to become more available, but shortages remain in some parts of the country, Bode noted. It is possible that some staffers might not be able to get their required shots.

"If the staff are not able to get it through no fault of their own, then what is their protocol? Are the staff testing ahead of time to ensure they don't come into camp with a positive COVID test?" Bode said.

What are the best questions parents can ask camp directors?

Rosenberg, Bode and expert groups say questions that any camp should be prepared to answer include:

- How has your camp program been adapted for COVID-19?
- How have you trained your staff differently?
- What activities are you offering, and how have they been adapted?
- How will grouping work at your camp?
- What will you do in the event of an infection?
- How will you communicate with parents?

"We would encourage parents to be seeking out safe [summer camp](#) opportunities," Bode concluded. "Outdoor camps offer them an opportunity to be

mask-off out in nature interacting with their peers, getting that sense of normalcy back a little bit. I think that's so important for our kids, particularly because we're not exactly sure what school's going to look like in the fall again."

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics has [guidance on summer camps for 2021](#).

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have [suggestions for summer and youth camps](#).

The American Camp Association offers a [field guide for camps](#).

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