



Opening Sleepaway Camps in New York State for Summer 2021

Since the 1860's, American summer camps have provided essential formative experiences for young people. In New York State, hundreds of thousands of children annually participate in day and sleepaway camp programs that profoundly impact their lives.

The development that occurs through camp experiences - including the social-emotional learning environment that camps foster, the myriad of opportunities for physical exercise and growth and, perhaps most importantly in our current world, the break from screens and technology - is essential.

In 2020, due to COVID, New York State allowed day camps to operate. State and local Departments of Health worked effectively with day camps around the state to help them prepare for, and deliver, a healthy summer. Sleepaway camps, however, were not allowed to operate. The human and financial cost from sleepaway camps not being able to operate in 2020 has been enormous.

This paper makes the case for why BOTH sleepaway camps and day camps can and should operate in 2021, whether or not COVID is still with us. This paper also serves as a reminder that planning for summer camp starts in the fall and the sooner there is certainty around the summer of 2021, the more likely we are to ensure that camps can survive financially.

Around the country this summer, the American Camp Association (ACA) estimates that roughly 60% of day camps operated and 20% of sleepaway camps operated.

Overwhelmingly, in New York State and across the country, summer camps operated safely, either with no COVID cases or a very limited number of cases that were managed effectively and safely in order to eliminate any material spread. Sleepaway camps operated safely in states with very little COVID transmission (Maine) and states which experienced the height of their transmission during the summer camp season (Texas). Day camps in the New York Metro area also operated in most cases, COVID-free.



The disruption to the normal life routine of children spending their days in a classroom during the school year and then at camps during the summer has caused extraordinary hardship and damage on the social-emotional spectrum. COVID has pervasively and detrimentally siloed children. Some of the costs can already be seen and some will show themselves in the years to come. Camps are perhaps the safest and best place, both from an emotional and physical health perspective, for young people to be. The social-emotional toll was, and remains, even greater in under-resourced communities.

The financial damage caused by camps not operating has been consequential. For camp operators, non-profit and for-profit alike, the cost of not running for one entire year has been devastating and, in many cases, may not allow them to re-open in 2021. The contribution camps make to New York via their local communities and economies is especially significant. Sleepaway camps, their staffs and visitors are often drivers of economic activity in rural areas, where most are located. Additionally, camps are a major source of summer employment for young people in urban and rural settings. It is well understood within the camp industry that if New York's summer camps cannot operate in 2021, the vast majority will cease to exist.

New York camps should be allowed to open safely, with appropriate COVID precautionary measures, in 2021. Just as the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) worked closely with day camps in 2020, so too can they work with sleepaway camps. Camps have proven they can operate safely, children desperately need what camps provide and if camps cannot operate in 2021, New York will no longer have a summer camp industry that serves children regardless of their economic status and ability level.



Camps Can Operate Safely

In 2020, overwhelmingly sleepaway camps ran safely, either with no COVID or limited positive cases that did not spread. The most effective tool for successful camps was a layering of nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) that limited the introduction and the spread of COVID within camp. These included the following (1):

- Pre-arrival quarantine
- Pre-arrival testing
- Post-arrival testing
- Symptom screening
- Cohorts
- Face coverings
- Physical distancing
- Enhanced hygiene measures
- Cleaning and disinfecting
- Outdoor programming

According to a study of four overnight camps in Maine, “Diligent use of multiple NPIs was successful in preventing and mitigating SARS-CoV-2 transmission in four Maine overnight camps. Although no single intervention can prevent SARS-CoV-2 transmission, a multilayered use of NPIs allowed camps to prevent transmission and quickly identify campers or staff members with SARS-CoV-2 infection to successfully mitigate spread.” (2)

Among the key findings of this study, *in which the camps studied had only three positive COVID cases among them for the duration of their camp seasons*, were the following:

1. Four potentially infectious campers and staff delayed their arrival due to pre-arrival positive tests, thus limiting potential cases from entering camp.
2. Campers quarantined in cohorts for the first two weeks of camp, thus reducing the chance for undetected cases to spread.
3. Post-arrival testing led to the isolation of three campers and staff with positive tests and the quarantine of their cohorts, which resulted in no further spread.



The camps in the study consistently and effectively employed a comprehensive combination of the NPIs listed above. The average number of campers and staff at each of the camps was roughly 250 and all the campers arrived and departed on the same days. Lastly, Maine camps benefited from a very low transmission rate of COVID during the camp season.

Can the NPIs effectively keep camps COVID-free with larger camp attendance, staggered arrivals and departures and in an area with high transmission? Camps in Texas proved that they could. Though there is no study akin to the Maine study produced for the state of Texas, anecdotal information from a number of Texas-based camps proved that NPIs are effective under much different circumstances than those in Maine.

The camp season in Texas runs from the beginning of June through the end of July. During that time, daily cases rose from roughly 1,000 on June 1st to daily highs of 10,000+ throughout much of the remainder of the camp season

There were many sleepaway camps in Texas that operated safely, including three successful operators: Camp Champions (Marble Falls, TX), Mo-Ranch (Hunt, TX) and Camp La Junta (Hunt, TX). Their summer data is as follows:

Camp Champions

Average attendance – 450 (maximum attendance was 575)

Duration of camp season – 9 weeks

Sessions – multiple; continual overlap between sessions

COVID cases – 0

Mo-Ranch

Average attendance – 100

Duration of camp season – 9 weeks

Sessions – weekly; some overlap between sessions

COVID cases – 0

La Junta

Average attendance – 350

Duration of camp season – 6 weeks

Sessions – 1 ½ weeks

COVID cases - 0

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In the New York Metro area, where day camps were allowed to run, they also ran safely. The Long Island Camps and Private Schools Association (LICAPS) is comprised of licensed member day camps in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. LICAPS conducted a summer study of 23 New York Metro day camps that included 8,480 campers and 3,698 staff with campers ranging from Pre-K to High School aged kids.

The 23 study camps, like those sleepaway camps in Maine and Texas, employed the same NPIs to great effectiveness. Even with the daily coming and going of day campers, staff and parents, (who, in most cases, dropped off and picked up their children), only two camps had positive cases of COVID. In one case, a camp had one camper and five staff test positive and in the other case, a camp had four campers and eight staff members test positive. In both cases, campers and staff were isolated and no further spread occurred.

A significant advantage of summer camp is that the vast majority of activities occur outside. At sleepaway camps, as with day camps, most every activity is built to take place outdoors, and the NYSDOH has long had guidelines in place for cabin living to minimize the spread of communicable disease. The outdoor nature of summer camp, combined with the NYSDOH's guidance, proved to be highly effective in keeping children safe in day camps in 2020. This combination will work for day and overnight camps in 2021.

It must be noted that there were instances across the country where camps had COVID outbreaks. The most notable among them took place at a Georgia overnight camp, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6931e1.htm> , where relaxing the NPI strategy resulted in hundreds of cases and the closure of the camp.

Like with other outbreaks studied, a theme that recurred throughout these instances was either a lack of NPI-based protocols or an unwillingness to employ them consistently. In such cases, either campers and staff were not tested prior to arrival, or they did not wear masks, maximize indoor ventilation opportunities or practice social distancing in the ways prescribed by the CDC.

Lastly, the ACA embarked on a project during the spring of 2020 to create a "Field Guide" for camps, partnering with EH&E, a nationally-recognized health care engineering firm. The "Field Guide" provided a comprehensive roadmap for camps that operated in 2020 and has used the lessons from this summer to update the guide for 2021:

<https://acacamps.app.box.com/s/7gkh9buu3ntssx2v38gajg4z94631lag>



The Social & Emotional Damage

Life disruptions due to COVID remain a problem today. They have created and exacerbated health issues for young people (and their parents) across the country. Camps have always been an essential, indispensable and irreplaceable source of social-emotional nourishment for young people.

Multiple studies over time attest to the social and emotional value and learning that uniquely happens at camp. In one 2019 study, “The development of independence, perseverance, responsibility, appreciation for differences, and appreciation for being present were camp-related outcomes that were highly attributable to their camp experiences and that these outcomes were also of high importance in daily life. Among all outcomes that were highly attributable to camp, study participants noted that camp was a primary setting for developing affinity for nature, how to live with peers, leisure skills, a willingness to try new things, independence, being present, and empathy and compassion.”(3)

In the spring of 2020, research from Common Sense Media confirmed what was intuitively understood with regards to the social/emotional costs of the pandemic for young people. 42% of teenagers in the study said they were more lonely than usual. Teenagers of color were more likely to voice concern that they or someone in their family would be exposed to the virus and about the potential economic effect on their family. Nearly 9 in 10 Hispanic teens said they were worried about their family’s ability to make a living. Additionally, the disparity between private and public school children’s access to teachers and technology was dramatic. Fewer than half the number public school children (31%) reported connecting with their teachers when compared to private school children (66%). (4)

Additionally, a June 2020 study of 5th through 12th grade girls by the Rox Institute for Research and Training showed that 79% of them reported feeling more isolated as a result of the pandemic. 96% reported that they missed going to school and 1/3 reported spending more than six hours each day on social media. Lastly, 37% of girls said their relationships were harder than before. (5)

With camps cancelled in 2020, the results for children were a) increased and persistent alone time, b) increased time spent on screen, and c) increased demands for the attention of parents. In the case of children from underserved communities, the cancellation of camp in 2020 was



felt more acutely. With fewer resources that might include fewer recreational outlets and facilities, less digital access to connect with peers or participate in virtual programs and parents whose work needs left them with too much unsupervised and unstructured time, the social dislocation and setbacks were felt more significantly in these communities, which are often served by hundreds of not-for-profit sleepaway camps across the state.

The Financial Damage

The financial devastation to non-profit and for-profit sleepaway camps in 2020 has resulted in closures and put nearly all others on the precipice.

Camps have an enormous impact on the New York State economy with particular impact on summer youth employment. In 2016, The “Economic Contribution of Youth Camps in the Northeast” study determined that New York State camps generate \$1.3 billion in revenues, have a total economic contribution to the state of \$3.6 billion and employ 60,000 during the summer months, the majority of whom are college and high school students.

Both non-profit and for-profit sleepaway camps were deeply impacted in 2020. While camps are diligently working on plans to open in 2021 using the success of camps around the country, they are also working furiously, and in many cases, futilely to financially survive the winter.

By the time the decision to close camps in 2020 was made, camps had already invested money to prepare for the upcoming season. The loss of these moneys has been catastrophic. Camps are not like other businesses which can close for a week, a month or a quarter and then re-open. If camps miss their summer season, they have lost an entire year’s worth of revenue. There is no way to replace that revenue nor attach the costs incurred last winter to any revenues. Camps prepared for, and invested, on a summer that never happened.

Should sleepaway camps not be permitted to open in 2021, it is not overstating things to say that the industry in New York will no longer exist.



New York Camp State Camp Directors Association (NYSCDA)

NYSCDA looks forward to partnering with the NYSDOH, the Governor's Office and state and local officials to ensure that day and sleepaway camps operate safely, provide desperately needed in-person social time for children and essential relief for parents, while continuing to provide important economic and employment activity and crucial tax revenue for New York State.

The lessons learned from 2020 (NY day camps and overnight camps in other states) have been well documented in the ACA's Field Guide <https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/coronavirus/camp-business/field-guide-camps>. The field guide is updated with new information on a regular basis. Given the success of the 2020 experience, NYSCDA is ready to work with the State on reopening in 2021.

We must start now. Planning for summer camp normally starts in the fall. Recruiting staff, enrolling campers and maintaining camp facilities starts in earnest in September of each year for the following summer. Waiting until February or March to know if camps can operate creates significant difficulties, and in some cases may simply be too late for camps to operate. To adequately plan for the summer of 2021, camps require certainty regarding guidelines to open and a timeframe that allows for that planning.

Having NYSDOH-certified plans in place will send a signal to parents, children and staff that they can count on camp and plan for next summer. There is no debating that our young people and our parents need camp more than ever!



FOOTNOTES

(1) Michael Ambrose, “Looking Forward to Summer 2021: Lessons learned and How We Can Plan Ahead.” <https://vimeo.com/473448273/b42b4a9837> (go to 5:02 of the video)

(2) Laura Blaisdell, Laurie Browne, Matt Fragala, Tracey Gaslin, David Shore: “2021 Looks to Be Another COVID-19 Summer Camp in the Time of COVID-19.

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6935e1.htm>

(3) D. Richmond, J. Sibthorp and C. Wilson: “Understanding the role of summer camps in the learning landscape: An exploratory sequential study. Journal of Youth Development, 14(3)

<https://jyd.pitt.edu/ojs/jyd/article/view/19-14-03-FA-01>

(4) <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/common-sense-media-coronavirus/>

(5) <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/597249b6d7bdcec54c7fdd10/t/5ef647de701c53068afb3c31/1593198563282/ROX+Research+Brief+Findings+from+1%2C273+US+Girls+on+School%2C+Technology%2C+Relationships+%26+Stress+Since+COVID-19.pdf>

Other resources:

<https://www.today.com/health/many-summer-camps-stayed-safe-covid-19-what-lessons-can-t191277>

https://nystateofpolitics.com/state-of-politics/new-york/capital-tonight/2020/11/23/pandemic-is-exacerbating-mental-health-problems-in-younger-children?cid=share_email