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Despite Covid-19 Outbreak Risks, Summer Camps Are Filling Up Quickly

Many summer camps plan to open this year, and directors say rigorous safety measures can protect children from Covid-19 while they're having fun. Here's what parents should know before signing up.



Noah and Lila Ratner last summer at Camp Robin Hood in Freedom, N.H.

PHOTO: CAMP ROBIN HOOD

By [Nancy Keates](#)

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Brian Ratner struggled over whether to send his two children to overnight camp last summer. Even though Camp Robin Hood, located in Freedom, N.H., had a solid plan to create a safety bubble, Mr. Ratner knew there was a risk of a Covid outbreak.

After three rounds of testing, including one before camp, and strict enforcement of mask-wearing, director Richard Woodstein called everyone together, turned up the music and announced the good news: Everyone tested negative. Campers ripped off their masks, hugged each other and danced.

Mr. Ratner soon received a letter from his 11-year-old daughter Lila. That moment was one of the greatest days of her life, she wrote. "Right now I don't feel like corona is a thing and I am so happy."

Lila and her 13-year-old brother, Noah, who haven't been to school in person since last March, are already signed up for summer 2021. "I feel much more confident than last year. I know what to expect," says Mr. Ratner, an attorney in Potomac, Md.

Overnight camp has always been a way to give children an experience removed from the realities of everyday life—a place to run free, learn new things and make lifelong friendships. Rarely have such joys been as amplified as during the Covid-19 pandemic, as many students have felt isolated most of the year, spending their time in front of computers and away from peers, unable to participate in sports, music or drama.

At many camps across the country, 2021 enrollment is already up, directors are saying. But with summer still months away, some parents are hesitant to put down deposits as virus cases surge in some parts of the country. Uncertainty remains about the timing of vaccinations and whether states will even allow overnight camps to operate.

In terms of overnight camps, "we are planning for a more normal summer," says Paul McEntire, chief operating officer of YMCA of the USA. In 2020, 75% of the YMCA's 315 overnight camps didn't open in person—and of those that did, only a handful had the usual occupancy levels. As of now, all its overnight camps are expected to open this year and some are already full, says Mr. McEntire.

As for day camps, about 60% of the YMCA's 10,000 daytime programs were open last year, and as of now all are planning to operate this coming summer, Mr. McEntire adds. Demand is expected to be high when enrollment opens, typically in March.



Ally Dykes at Camp Champions in Marble Falls, Texas, last summer.

PHOTO: CAMP CHAMPIONS

The American Camp Association, a nonprofit organization with more than 2,500 accredited camps, estimates only about 18% of overnight camps in the U.S. opened in-person last summer. That's partly because of a patchwork of regulations across the country, with some states, like Maine, North Carolina and Texas allowing campers to attend, while others, such as New York and Washington, prohibiting it. ACA's president and chief executive, Tom Rosenberg, says the majority of overnight camps are planning to open this year, subject to state rules.

The majority of the approximately 6,000 day camps accredited by the ACA will open this summer, too, Mr. Rosenberg says. Last year, only Mississippi and Puerto Rico outright banned them, but many day camps were virtual only. When enrollment opens in the spring, he expects in-person day camps to be in great demand, since parents rely on them not only for

social and learning development but also for activities and supervision while they're at work.

The ACA and the YMCA last year created a [field guide](#) for camp professionals on how to keep campers safe in a pandemic. This year they will update that, taking into account lessons learned from the camps that opened, drawn from a series of surveys it convened on operations, innovations and public health. "We know it will be another Covid summer, but we also now know what works," says Mr. Rosenberg.

Several large Covid outbreaks occurred at camps last summer, including one in Georgia where nearly half the camp was infected, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [In its report](#), the CDC noted that the camp, which wasn't named, followed some but not all of the recommended safety measures, such as requiring campers to wear masks.

Laura Blaisdell, a Maine pediatrician, co-authored a [separate CDC report](#) that examined how four Maine camps handled the virus threat last summer. In all, three cases were identified upon arrival, averting transmission to over 1,000 attendees. She says states mistakenly thought overnight camps would be higher risk, but there ended up being fewer outbreaks because administrators took a multilayered approach with safety, including pre-camp quarantine, pre- and post-arrival testing and symptom screening, and physical distancing among groups of campers.

"I am 110% sending him back this summer. There's no doubt in my mind," says Dani Yagerman, whose 8-year-old son Cooper attended Camp Wildwood in Bridgton, Maine, for the first time last summer. Ms. Yagerman, a pediatric nurse from East Williston, N.Y., says she did a ton of research before she made her decision, including talking to several physicians. "They all said send him to camp," she says. Her doubts disappeared when she had a FaceTime session with Cooper halfway through and saw he was "radiating happiness."



Cooper Yagerman at Camp Wildwood last summer.

PHOTO: DANI YAGERMAN

Camp Wildwood saw a slight uptick in enrollment last summer, in part because new families signed on when other camps closed. The all-boys camp shortened its session to four weeks and created its own operating plan. It lengthened staff training to include a quarantine period, hired three additional on-site medical professionals and initially grouped campers into cohorts that had little or no interaction with other groups. There were no positive Covid cases, say directors Louis Nail and Adam Oblatz. About 90% of kids who attended have already signed up again for this summer.

Camp Manitou in Oakland, Maine, also reported zero positive Covid cases. Last summer it modified its program to eliminate outside contact and maximize outdoor activities. It came up with new al fresco theater shows, including a rendition of "Spider-Man" that used the ropes course and a trampoline, with the

titular character entering by zip line.

Hudson Brown, 16, says it was the best session he's ever had, despite a five-hour trip by plane and three-hour bus ride to get there. Camp was a welcome contrast to the isolation he'd felt at home in Los Angeles after schools closed.

"It was a joy I'd been missing," he says. His mom, Alison Brown, says it wasn't an easy decision, but was impressed with what the camp was doing to make things safe. Hudson and his brother, Griffin, 13, will go again this summer—even if she gets as many comments again from friends about the risks they are taking. "Everyone had opinions," says Ms. Brown, who is in commercial production.

Washington state didn't allow any overnight camps to operate last summer—which closed Four Winds Camp on Orcas Island for the first time since 1927. Enrollment is already full for summer 2021, even though it's unclear what the state will allow, says its director Paul Sheridan. Directors of some 60 camps in Washington have already started working together to try to convince legislators they can operate safely. "Our parents are clamoring for it," says Sheila Tallmon, director of Camp Northwestern on Johns Island, Wash., who says enrollment this summer is at normal, non-pandemic levels.

Camp Champions in Marble Falls, Texas, also looked very different from normal last summer, says owner Steve Baskin. There was no horseback riding and no singing without masks. Campers ate in shifts in the dining halls, and parents weren't allowed out of their cars when they dropped off and picked up. The camp had no positive cases, he says. "Once you start to understand the principles, it becomes clear what you need to do," says Mr. Baskin.

How Camps Work to Keep Kids Safe

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention examined four overnight camps in Maine that reported no Covid-19 transmissions last summer. Here are some of measures the CDC and camp directors found to be most effective at reducing risk:

- Campers and their families quarantined for 10 to 14 days ahead of their arrival.
- Pre-arrival and post-arrival testing, followed by another test four to 10 days later.
- No parents were allowed on the campgrounds at drop-off or pick-up.
- Cohorts, or small groups, did activities and lived together while maintaining a physical distance.
- Masks were required when campers were interacting outside their cohorts. With second round of negative testing, some groups were enlarged.
- Camps implemented enhanced handwashing regimens and other cleaning measures.
- Activities were moved outdoors, and campers played sports that allowed for physical distancing.