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LIFE & STYLE

As Summer Camps Weigh Opening, Parents Scramble for Options

Even as some lockdowns ease, the summer-camp experience is likely to change, prompting some parents to seek refunds

By Anne Marie Chaker

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Nicole Ives had a plan for this summer—six weeks of various day camps for her daughter, Amelia, paid for in January with dates tracked in a Google spreadsheet.

Many summer camps and recreational programs are still deciding how—and whether—to reopen safely. While some have said they won't open, others are making changes to accommodate stricter health protocols. The vast majority of camps say they are in limbo as they figure out head counts, refunds and budgets—and if they can offer a genuine summer-camp experience. Parents are considering alternatives, just in case. They also are rethinking finances, summer schedules and if they are ready for their children to swim and share bunks with others.

“At the end of the day, the parent has to say, ‘I am comfortable with my child going away from me under these circumstances,’ ” said Elizabeth Cochran, executive director of YMCA Camp Ernst in Burlington, Ky.



Nicole Ives and her daughter Amelia at home in Rockville, Md., during quarantine.

PHOTO: NICOLE IVES

Ms. Ives, a 48-year-old instructional designer for a Baltimore university, has received emails from camps saying they hope to open, albeit with restrictions. Others are soliciting families' views on what they would like to see offered. "Think of this as a virtual focus group, how can we cater to your family's needs during this difficult time," wrote Diana Tsai, camp director at VisArts, a Rockville, Md., visual-arts camp and one of five camps that Amelia Ives is supposed to attend.

"Every camp is running models of 'Should I close or should I stay open,'" said Jeff Merhige, executive director of YMCA Camp Widjiwagan in Antioch, Tenn., where zip lining, boating, water skiing and other activities are scheduled to begin May 25, though that may be postponed.

Some camps have decided to not reopen at all. In a recent letter, Girl Scouts Nation's Capital executive director Lidia Soto-Harmon wrote that this summer's sleepaway, day and evening camp programs serving about 7,000 girls in the Washington, D.C., area would be canceled and families would receive refunds. Girl Scouts Nation's Capital is one of 111 local councils affiliated with Girl Scouts of the USA, an umbrella organization. National spokesman Michael Lopes says it is unclear how many of the 111 local councils, which operate independently, have made a similar decision.

Meanwhile, some parents are wondering whether to ask for refunds. Ms. Ives would like to put some of the \$4,000 she paid for Amelia's camps this summer toward having a wooden fence built around her backyard. Some have indicated they will provide refunds; others have said they are contemplating an online program. And while she may be fine with Amelia participating in some virtual activities, Ms. Ives said that probably won't sustain her interest for the whole day. She also isn't sure that by summer she will be ready for her 8-year-old daughter to be around other children.

Amelia, a second-grader at Rock Creek Valley Elementary School, said she would miss playing with other children. “I really like going to camp,” she said. Daily life since school closed in mid-March has included virtual playdates, reading and schoolwork, which can get boring. But she is willing to give online camp a try. “I think it would be OK to do it on a computer,” she said.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What do you think summer camp will look like this year? Join the conversation below.

A number of summer-camp operators said they will base their plans on federal, state and local recommendations, as well as their budgets and families’ preferences. In a statement, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it plans to publish “guidelines and decision tools” for various settings, including summer camps, according to spokeswoman Kate Grusich. Many camps said they believe such measures will include social distancing, face covers and stepped-up hygiene practices.

At Liberty Lake Day Camp in Bordentown, N.J., Director Andy Pritikin plans to increase the number of full-time nurses to three from two. He says the extra staff likely will be needed for new practices and safety protocols. “We just spent \$5,000 on 108 gallons of hand sanitizer,” he said. Mr. Pritikin also wants campers to come prepared. “In addition to the sunscreen and the pool towel, we may ask parents to pack a cloth mask,” he said.

At YMCA Camp Ernst, an overnight camp on 365 acres, Ms. Cochran said she is thinking about midday health screenings to take the temperature of each child and employee. She also might keep groups small, she said, and have staff serve meals “instead of pass-the-spaghetti bowl.”



Campers participated in creative ceramics at VisArts, of Rockville, Md., last summer.

PHOTO: VISARTS

An April 27 memo to state health officials from the American Camp Association of Martinsville, Ind., an accrediting body for summer camp operators, said the federal Guidelines for Opening Up America Again, released April 16, appear to allow summer camps to reopen as part of the guidelines' phased approach that is based on a downward trajectory of infections. The association is working with the YMCA and a Boston-based consulting firm to develop educational resources for camps on how to operate in response to the pandemic. But camp officials said the clock is ticking and many are moving ahead with new procedures and infrastructure investments. It is likely that this summer, camps will look very different from one place to another.

“Right now I am trying to meet and exceed every possible guideline,” said Camp Widjiwagan’s Mr. Merhige. But the details of what they will be are just a guess, he said. He has invested more than \$35,000 on upgrades such as outdoor hand-washing stations, more ceiling fans for improved circulation, even cubicle walls around bunk beds. Campers will move in groups of 10 or fewer, at least six feet from other groups. “I’m building 60 10-person bleachers so we can keep kids separated. We are going all-in to solve this summer,” Mr. Merhige said. Last month he posted on social media a video explaining what to expect at the camp.

In Rockville, Md., Koa Sports League is asking families to host small groups of five to nine campers in their backyards—fulfilling what it expects will be some sort of small-group requirement. Host families would get a 50% discount on camp tuition and two counselors would oversee each group. The program’s chief executive, Tony Korson, said the workaround would circumvent the challenge of figuring out where hundreds of 7-to-13-year-old children could play, particularly if many schools, parks and sports fields are closed.



Koa Sports League campers at the end of the first week of camp last summer.

PHOTO: KOA SPORTS LEAGUE

In Hailey, Idaho, Stephanie Hatzenbuehler says her daughter Eva, 13, and son Miles, 10, likely will go to summer camp if it reopens. She has already paid for drama camp for Eva and snowboarding camp for Miles. Both she and her husband, a doctor, had coronavirus in March, so she believes that her children have had it—without symptoms—and acquired immunity.

Carmi Brown, chief program officer for a nonprofit and a mother of three in Tampa, Fla., has enrolled her children in summer camp but isn’t counting on it. She is thinking about a backup

plan, such as having a cousin come and stay to help with the children. She would like a refund if camp doesn't open. But she also fears that because of the lockdown, some beloved camps won't be around next year. "Are they even going to survive?" she said.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Parents slogging through daily life in the pandemic are wondering whether summer camp paid for months ago will be affected. The answer is probably yes. Among factors to consider:

- **Stay or Go:** Parents have to decide whether they are ready for their children to reintegrate with others through summer activities. They also should figure out whether the experience will feel enough like summer camp to be worthwhile.
 - **Safety First:** Families should ask what camps are doing to make things safe. Will face masks be required? Will food and utensils be passed around or will meals be served one-on-one by a staff member? Can groups be kept small and distancing protocols observed? Where will children play—pools, playgrounds, sports fields—and what are the local ordinances on those sites?
 - **Refund Policies:** Parents who decide to withdraw children should ask for refunds as soon as possible. Most camps will give families their money back but request advance notice to adjust staffing needs. Some nonprofit camps are asking families to consider leaving their payment as a deposit for next year, to help defray maintenance costs.
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